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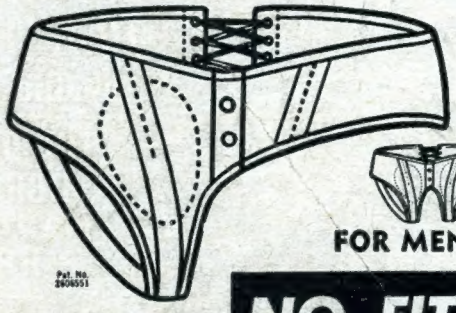

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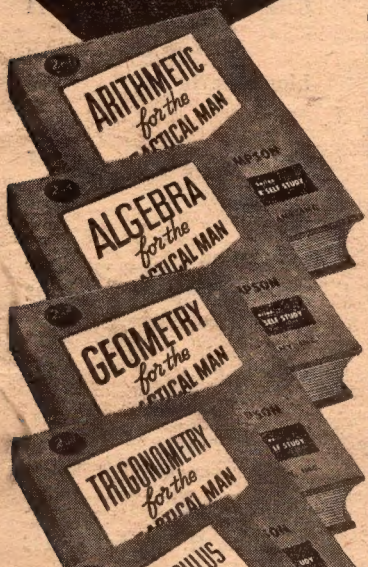
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FIRST MAY NUMBER

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RANCH ROMANCES

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HELEN DAVIDGE
Editor

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Small Town

Dear Editor:

I think your department is very interesting, and after reading it several times I decided to take your advice and write you. I come from a very small town (87 people, to be exact). I am 15 and have blue eyes and blonde hair. I like all sports, especially football and basketball. I'll write to anyone but would particularly like to write to servicemen. I expect to get a mailbox full of mail.

JOAN SEYLES

Box 473
LeLoup, Kansas

A Jamaican

Dear Editor:

I am a Jamaican and would like the opportunity of corresponding with American men. Am a regular reader of RANCH ROMANCES and enjoy it very much. My age is 30, and I stand 5'6" and weigh 130 lbs. I sincerely hope my plea will be answered.

IRIS POWELL

11 Maacfield Avenue
Whitfield Town PO
Kingsdon Jamaica, B.W.I.

Lonely Man From Texas

Dear Editor:

I have tried to get into the Our Air Mail column twice, but no luck. So here's another try. I have read RANCH ROMANCES several years and enjoy all of it. I am almost a straner in this southern town, and get very lonely at times. I'm 5'10", 169 lbs., and have brown hair—graying a little—and blue eyes. Am middle-aged, a World War II vet, and can tell some interesting experiences. Here's hoping and waiting for lots of letters.

GEORGE MASSEY

General Delivery
San Antonio, Texas

A Mountain Boy

Dear Editor:

This is my first try to get in your Our Air Mail and I do hope I will get in. I'm a lonely mountain boy, 17 years old, with brown eyes and brown hair. I like fishing, hunting and horse back riding. My hobbies are drawing and stamp collecting, and I also enjoy Western and hill billy music. I live in Colorado by the famous Pike's Peak.

WARREN HERNER

Box 385
Victor, Colorado

Tall Texan

Dear Editor:

I'm writing this letter hoping that it will find its way into Our Air Mail column. I'm a GI coming from Texas. I am about 6'1" tall, 20 years old, with brown hair and eyes. I would like very much to hear from girls all over the world.

CPL LOYD D. INCE

RA 18320338
Hq, Btry 1st Cav Div Arty
APO 201—c/o PM
San Francisco, California

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Lonely Widow

Dear Editor:

I am a very lonely widow, and would like to have my letter in Our Air Mail. I will answer all letters received, if possible. Have dark brown hair and brown eyes, am 5'5" and weigh 112 lbs. Have been reading RANCH ROMANCES for years, and enjoy it very much.

MRS. GRACE MAYBERY

Box 89
Bath, Maine

Sweet Sixteen

Dear Editor:

I am a girl of 16 and very lonely. Have been reading RANCH ROMANCES for about two years now, and think it a fine magazine. I'm 5'5" tall and weigh 115 lbs. Please print my letter; I promise to answer all letters received.

NORMA LOU BOAZ

Sonora, Kentucky

Collects Hankies

Dear Editor:

I have been an ardent reader of RANCH ROMANCES for a long time, and I'd like to have my name in the magazine. I'm 5'6" tall, have blue eyes and brown hair, and am 27 years old. My hobbies are writing letters, seeing shows, swimming, and also collecting hankies. I do hope you will find a place in your magazine for me.

MARIE FRATUS

784 Conners
Detroit 15, Michigan

Lives at Resort

Dear Editor:

I am a very lonely girl who likes to write letters. I live at a resort where there is nothing to

do except at vacation time. In the meantime, I would like to write to girls and boys all over the world. I am 15, have red hair and blue eyes. I like to sing and dance, like other sports also. I promise, if I get in Our Air Mail, I will answer all letters.

MISS AUDREY BLACKBURN
Rt. 1 Cama Beach
Stanwood, Washington

Other Way Around

Dear Editor:

This is my first try at Our Air Mail. I've written to several people and have received answers; now I'd like to have people write to me. I'm 16 years old and 5'4" tall. I have a suntanned complexion, wavy dark brown hair, and hazel eyes. My hobbies are painting, swimming and outdoor sports, also collecting coins. I'll gladly exchange snapshots, and will answer every letter I receive.

TERESA HAMILTON
13 Shipo Pen Road
Kingston PO
Jamaica B.W.I.

Calling Little Gals

Dear Editor:

Just finished reading the late issue of RANCH ROMANCES and enjoyed it very much, as usual. I would appreciate it if you would print this pen pal plea for me. I'm 23 years old, have very dark brown hair and eyes to match. I'm 6'1" tall and weigh 169 lbs. I like all sports, but swimming, football, and basketball are my favorites. I would like to hear from some lonely little gals. Please write and make a lonely guy happy.

KEITH THOMAS
Route 3, Box 270
Stockton, California

For a Friend

Dear Editor:

I'm writing for a friend of mine. Our Air Mail helped me to get pen pals, and I hope you can help her to find some. She is a tall (5'6") slender (114 lbs.) blonde, with lovely hair and hazel eyes. She likes to dance, and one of her passions is writing and reciving letters. She is 18 yrs old, and would enjoy writing to servicemen or boys over 18.

MISS JUDITH PETERSON
1107 5th St.
Tillamook, Oregon

Likes Sports

Dear Editor:

I have read RANCH ROMANCES for three or four years and like it very much. I am 17, and have dark brown hair and blue eyes. Please publish my letter, because I get pretty lonesome just sitting around the house when I don't go to school. I would love to receive lots of letters to answer. My favorite sport is horseback riding, but I also like to swim and skate. I hope I will receive a lot of letters.

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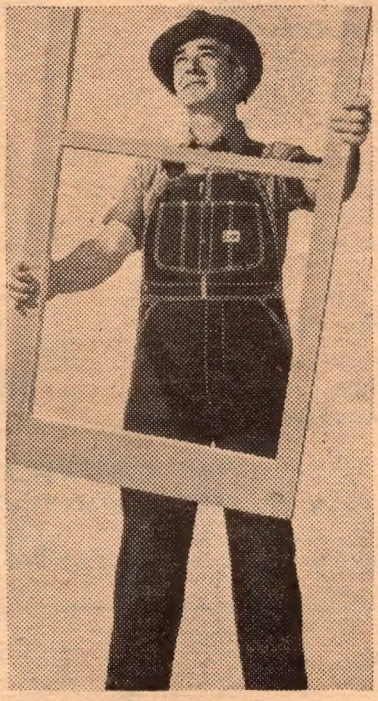

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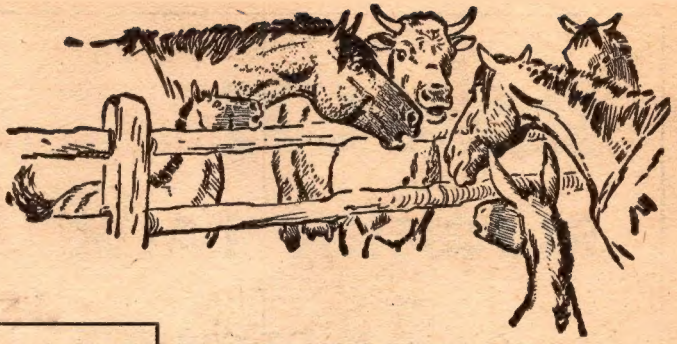

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IN PETALUMA, Calif., when garage mechanics investigated a "strange rattle" in a man's car, they found a rattlesnake in the back seat, poised to strike.

IN PAWHUSKA, Okla., after racing 28 miles to put out a fire which was already out when they got there, firemen found that they'd lost their fire hose en route, anyway.

WHEN A SEATTLE lady got her divorce she was awarded her husband's carpenter tools after she explained she'd have to finish building their house.

IN KANSAS CITY a man changing a flat tire let go of the spare one, which rolled away toward an oncoming car whose driver skidded to a stop, snagged the spare, and drove off.

IN SHEBOYGAN, Wisc., a lawyer dashing to keep an appointment with a judge was arrested. The judge complimented him on his promptness and then fined him $5 for speeding.

IN WICHITA FALLS, Texas, a young man explained that he had set fires that caused $716,000 of damage because he wanted a little excitement. The grand jury is preparing to give him some more.

IN SANTA ROSA, Calif., a lad with more than romance on his mind was picked up on the way to visit his girl, because he was carrying a pistol, a rifle and a sawed-off shotgun.

IN WEST BEND, Wisc., a man who saw red when his furnace broke down, hammered the heating system to pieces, smashed the living-room windows, knocked down a policeman his wife summoned, landed in jail after an hour's struggle.

A BEFUDDLED basketball player in the last exciting seconds of a game at Washington State U ran the wrong way, scored a basket, and won the game for the other team.

IN LOS ANGELES a man addressed a club on "How to Train Your Memory," shook hands all around, and departed, leaving his hat behind him.

IN FAIRFIELD, Iowa, a lady on her way to jail for shooting a rabbit in her yard, wondered if she could bring along her rifle to kill the rats she heard they had there.

IN ST. LOUIS a theatre advertised an exciting double feature: "Hellfire" and "Brimstone."

IN COMFORT, Texas, a man turned down for a $2500 business loan at a bank, pulled a gun and made off with $1730.

RANCH FLICKER TALK

by movie editor ROBERT CUMMINGS

This famous top-hand of stage, screen and TV corrals the best of the Westerns

RIDING SHOTGUN

There's plenty of action and plenty of thrills, but suspense is accented in Warners' latest Western

WHEN you think of Western movies, you think of maybe half a dozen actors. Plenty of Hollywood stars do one or two Western action pictures, but the real stars of these movies are limited to a few. And the stars we're talking about lead the box-office polls year after year.

One of them is the lean, sandy-haired six-footer, Randolph Scott. Randy hasn't made a movie that *wasn't* a Western since his early days in Hollywood. Year after year he gives us what most of us want—exciting, adventurous tales of pioneer days. And Randy has been among the top ten stars for years. In the latest poll he stands in third place among all the heroes of Hollywood.

So his latest movie is news. It's called *Riding Shotgun,* produced by Warner Bros., a studio that hasn't forgotten that Westerns win Academy Awards too.

There's action in this movie, and plenty of thrills, but the emphasis is on suspense. Just as in *High Noon,* the clock that ticks up on the screen moves no faster than the watch on your wrist. The time which elapses during the fast-moving story is exactly the same as the running time of the movie.

Randy plays a stagecoach guard, suspected of complicity in a holdup of the stage. The angry residents of the town where he is arrested want to take justice into their own hands. Randy, friendless and alone, must hold the whole town at bay to save his own life.

His leading lady is a newcomer to the screen, Joan Weldon. Joan prepared for a movie career by learning how to sing. By now she's made three pictures and hasn't sung a note.

Joan also practiced for her first Western by learning how to ride and how to reach for a sixgun. And then when she saw the script of *Riding Shotgun,* she discovered that she had no riding or shooting scenes. Joan is through with practicing.

Ten-year-old Alvin Freeman, however, had orders from the studio to practice up for his part as a slingshot expert, and he was, in a way, on an expense account. He

had to use the David-and-Goliath type of slingshot, instead of the modern rubber-band kind, and he was directed to a vacant lot to rehearse, with the promise that Warner Bros. would pay for any broken windows.

But Alvin became so expert so quickly that he never cracked a pane. He did put a dent in a fender, but it was his own toy automobile. And there was one near-miss of a stray dog, which left the premises immediately. So there was no bill for damages presented to the studio.

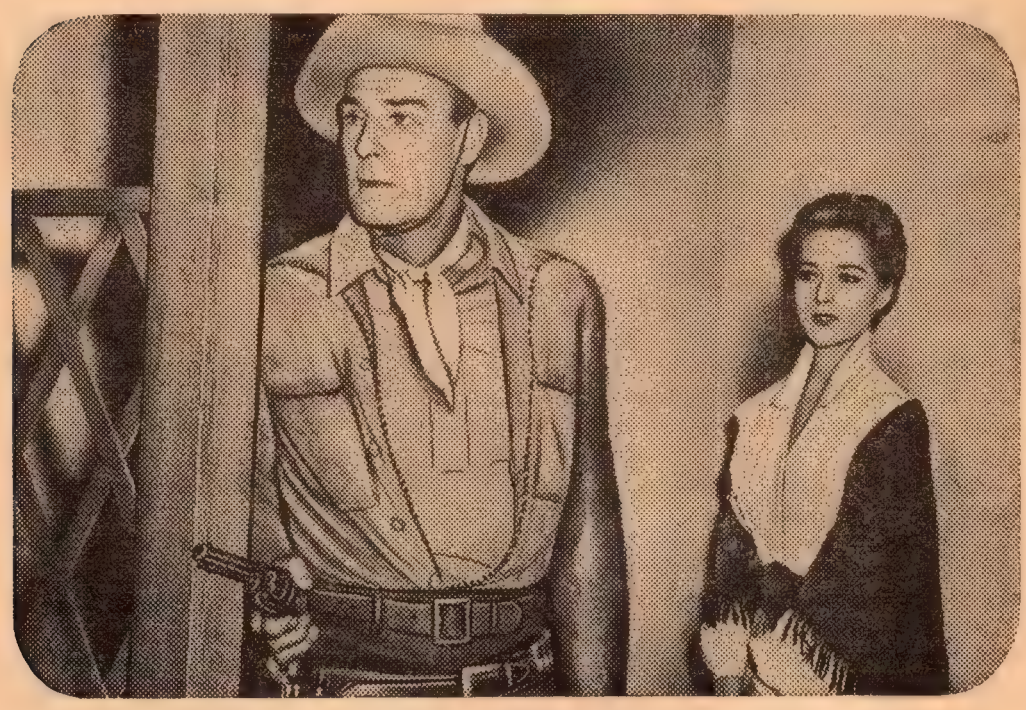
Randy, in spite of his solid popularity with movie fans, felt a little uneasy about his part in *Riding Shotgun*. It's the first picture in years he's made without his golden palomino co-star, Stardust. But the part for Randy's mount was so minor that Stardust wasn't used.

"The producer was probably afraid he'd steal the scene," said Randy. "I've been wondering for quite a while whether folks came to see me or Stardust. Well, when this picture is released, we'll find out."

Wayne Morris appears in support of Randy and Joan in the comedy part of a deputy sheriff with a bulging waistline. The ironic thing is that until a few months ago Wayne could have amply filled the part without padding. In fact, it was a tendency to spread through the middle which kept him out of the leading parts he had been playing for years.

Recently, though, Wayne has gone on a diet and stuck to it, which keeps him down to 205 pounds—perfectly normal for a big fellow like him. This is his first role since he's streamlined himself. He was very pleased to have to add padding to his stomach for the part, but fearful that other studios would see him and assume that the padding was his own.

To clear up any misunderstandings, Wayne had pictures of himself made, stripped as far as was decent, standing on a scale which clearly registered 205 muscular pounds.



Old favorite Randy Scott, and lovely newcomer Joan Weldon

JOAN WELDON
From Opera to Horse Opera

RANCH FLICKER TALK

JOAN WELDON wasn't born in a dressing room or cradled in a costume trunk, and she regrets it bitterly. She thinks it's quite unfair that this glamorous upbringing happened to her grandmother and not to her.

Actually, her grandmother's backstage youth has had a big effect on Joan. Ever since she was five and went to live at Grandma's, Joan has been headed for an acting career.

The last active thespian in Joan's family was her great-grandfather, a vaudeville star, who named his daughter Olio. It was this lady who took over Joan's rearing when her mother died, and who encouraged her theatrical ambitions.

Singing had certainly been her most profitable talent—until she got into the movies, that is. She helped put herself through college by singing in the chorus of the San Francisco Grand Opera Company, and later went on tour in light opera. Finally she played a leading role in the operetta, *Song of Norway*.

It was this performance which caught the eye of the studio. Joan was signed to a contract, and then, apparently, groomed for Westerns. Her two big parts, so far, have been in *Riding Shotgun* with Randolph Scott, and in *The Command* with Guy Madison.

Joan is not really upset by this abrupt change in the planned course of her career—after all, she's in the movies, isn't she? But she goes right on, doggedly practicing her trills and her scales.

Music, in fact, is her only hobby, and she makes all her friends among music-minded people.

She told me her mind is not on romance at all. "I'm much too busy," she said. But I had heard that when she was on location at the Mojave Desert, she got a daily telephone call from San Francisco. "Was that business?" I inquired.

"No," said Joan, "it was matrimony." Then she sighed and added, "He's a very nice guy, but I'm not having any matrimony this year—I don't think."

I asked her whether she'd found a dramatic career glamorous.

"Oh, not glamorous, really," she answered. "I always knew acting was hard work, but I'll admit I never expected the rugged life we have making Westerns. Horses, rattlesnakes, dust, heat—well, you just don't bargain for those things when you think of being an actress.

"And there's one other drawback," she confessed. "I love to eat. I think it's just as bad for an actress to have an appetite as to have buck teeth. At least, the results of the appetite can be just as bad. So now—" she sighed—"I'm on a diet. Meat and leafy vegetables."

"It's a tough life," I said sympathetically.

But Joan laughed and disagreed with me vehemently. "Those things are the only drawbacks I can think of. Hollywood is really wonderful."

Joan is full of high spirits and gaiety, and you know she expects it to go on being wonderful—if she's careful, that is. She's just a bit superstitious, and she's taking no chances of changing her present good luck. She never walks under ladders, whistles backstage or puts her shoes on a table—even new shoes, wrapped up in a parcel.

For good luck she always wears a tiny gold cross, and for mascots she has a collection of ceramic dogs and cats—at least one from every city she's ever visited.

She doesn't look like a girl particularly in need of luck—a tall, shapely brunette with flashing blue eyes. But, as she says, you can't be too careful.

(Warner)

Music is Joan's hobby; all her friends are music-minded

TO KILL A MAN

by GILES A. LUTZ

RASH HAD an old score to settle with the man who'd stolen his wife, and it could only be settled in blood

RASH DONOVAN leaned against the station wall and watched the milling crowd on the platform at Folsom. It was an irritable crowd; the train ride from Sacramento to here had strained tempers thin. Men pushed and crowded, and the heat of the afternoon and the dust that hung thick in the air added to their irascibility.

The well-dressed city men were the worst, Rash thought. They arrogantly demanded the same kind of service here that they were used to in the cities. The poorly-dressed ones were timid and uncertain, bunched together like frightened sheep, blocking the movement of the crowd. The women in crinoline, silks, and satins were equally out of place. They dabbed at their faces with dainty handkerchiefs and fretted over the handling of their baggage.

If they thought they had something to complain of here, wait until they journeyed farther into the wilderness.

At one end of the platform a short, fat man with a sweaty, beefy face yelled, "Bring your baggage along. If it ain't weighed, it won't go."

There are no manners in a crowd, Rash thought as he watched men shove ahead of women, trying to be first to the stages. He suspected that Folsom seemed raw and wild to most of these people, but they insisted on going on. It was astounding how the lure of metal from the earth could drag so many people from their natural habitat.

It was not difficult to spot the men who belonged in the wilderness. They were dressed in rough miner's clothing, and the heat and dust had not twisted their faces into angry masks. A half-dozen women, standing in a little group to one side, would also fit the life ahead of them. It was not hard to tell what those six women were. They showed a bold expanse of ankle, and their gaudy silk dresses displayed too much shoulder and too much throat. Rash thought that brawling, lusty Washoe would appreciate that kind of women much more than their proper, sedate sisters. The men in the crowd here appreciated them. Rash saw heads turned and calculating glances put upon them, and each time those glances were met with bold invitations from unabashed eyes. The other women in the crowd did not feel that way about them. Rash almost grinned as he saw rigid shoulders and tightly pressed lips as women walked by the six. He almost expected them to draw their skirts tightly about them to avoid contamination.

The fat man was bawling again, and he had a gravelly voice that irritated Rash. He was brow-beating the crowd with coarse words, and Rash's eyes glinted. He had known the baggage master's type before, using petty authority like a club to beat down little frightened people.

IMPATIENCE leaped and twisted inside Rash, but in two years a man learned to control it—at least outwardly. Nothing showed on his browned, leanly cut face. The jaw was a sharp, harsh line, and the mouth, that seemed cut wide for laughter, apparently had not known it for a long time. The nose was hawklike, flaring slightly at the nostrils, and the gray eyes were deep and well-spaced above it. The broad-brimmed hat was pushed carelessly back, showing black hair faintly filmed with dust. He was dressed in rider's clothes, boots worn, heels slightly run over.

When he straightened, he would tower over every man on the platform. He was broad in the shoulders and lean in the flanks, and there was an air of hard, sure competence about him. He also had an air of reserve so plainly apparent that only the most bold would attempt to penetrate it. That impassive face had discouraged several tries at conversation on the train ride. Three of the six women had tried and were driven away by it, and they were used to driving in under the toughest of rebuffs.

The reserve was not a normal thing. It was born of two years of loneliness and a bitter, hardening resolution. He was going to kill a man—and perhaps a woman—if he ever caught up with them. Sometimes logic told him to abandon this fruitless search, to forget how his life had been shattered, and to try to make a new one. But the bitterness would not leave him, and the memories drove him on.

A man could not forget holding his first son in his arms, watching the small daily changes in the baby, the first steps and the first words. Also, he could not forget that Chris was dead, dead at the age of four with all the years of promise ahead taken from him. A man and a woman were responsible for Chris's death.

Even now, Rash could not put the title of wife or mother in place of the word woman. She was not his wife; she had not been since she ran away with Abel McKean. Not only had she taken Chris with her, but she had taken two thousand dollars of Rash's money—or rather the bank's money. Rash had just borrowed it to buy that herd of short yearlings he had long had his eye on. His ranch had gone to make good the bank's loss.

Sometimes the hopelessness of his quest sickened him. It had been six months since he had crossed a really live trail. He had a name and a vague description of McKean, and could recall seeing the man a couple of times and no more. He had a hazy impression of a smooth-faced man with a tight, cruel line of mouth. He had seen this tranger in town, but had never thought that McKean would touch his life until the day he had returned to his ranchhouse and found Candace and Chris gone.

In two year's time, he had searched the Territory of Arizona, he had patiently covered Southern California, asking his questions. Twice he had been only a couple of days behind them, but some instinct had driven them on. Now, the richness of this new strike at Washoe was drawing people from all over the country. Everywhere a man went, he heard of the wonders of the silver deposits there. Virginia City was becoming as well known as the larger coastal cities, and the lure of quick and easy wealth might draw a man like McKean there. Rash hoped so.

PEOPLE were beginning to be loaded into the waiting stages for the trip over the mountains. Even when the stages were uncomfortably full, the agents insisted on pushing in another passenger. Rash wanted no part of that stage trip. The close proximity of so many people on the train had bothered him, and he would not stand the additional crowding of the stages. He would make the trip over the mountains on horseback, where a man could be alone with his thoughts.

Only one woman still talked to the fat man, and Rash moved toward them. The fat man shouted, "I told you you're allowed thirty pounds baggage. Anything over is twenty-five cents a pound. Either pay for the excess or leave it."

The woman reluctantly counted three pieces of silver into the man's hand, sniffed at him, then moved hastily to a waiting stage.

Rash stepped to the fat man. "I'm looking for a woman." He would make no attempt to describe McKean. He could remember no outstanding traits about him. Besides, in a country where men predominated, a woman would be more easily remembered.

"This woman is small," he went on. He touched his upper biceps. "Wouldn't stand more than this. Blue eyes, and the blondest hair a man ever saw." That gave him a twist, recalling that. He remembered the feel of it during the first few happy months.

The fat man said derisively, "If you're looking for a woman, why didn't you pick up one of those six?" He jerked his thumb at the stage into which the women were climbing. "Take your pick out of them. One of them ought to meet your requirements."

Anger corded Rash's neck, and he forced his voice steady. "This woman had a tiny mole on her left cheek. Looked like a beauty mark. Have you seen—"

The fat man gestured impatiently. "You think I got nothing to do but look for beauty marks. Go on, mister. I'm busy."

He started to turn away, and Rash's big hand flashed out and fastened onto the lapels of his coat. The hand turned, and the lapels tightened. The fat man squalled and struck at the hand, and Rash raked the knuckles of his left hand across the man's lips. Not hard enough to break flesh, but the blow carried a warning sting. He kept twisting the lapels, and the cloth tightened the beefy throat until the fat man gasped for breath. Rash lifted him until the man's weight was balanced on his toes.

He said softly, "I've been listening to you brow-beating people. You've forgotten your manners. Do you want to answer my questions, or do you need more mannering?"

The red of anger faded from the fat man's face as he stared into those cold eyes. He said weakly, "How do I know if she came through here? I see new people every day. How can I remember them all?"

Rash nodded and released the man. He had received a fair answer, and he was

satisfied. He had not really expected the man to remember, but he never overlooked the slightest lead. Some of the stage drivers might remember, but in the rush of the coming trip, now was no time to talk to them. He would have to spend a patient time running down individual drivers, and his best bet there would probably be at Virginia City.

RASH sauntered away. He saw two of the stage drivers glaring at him. The fat man worked for the same line as they did, and they would feel a certain loyalty. Several of the passengers stared wide-eyed out of the coaches, then

looked hastily away as Rash's level glance met theirs. It would have been wiser to have avoided that scene at the scales, but there had been no other way of getting the information he wanted. He had asked the conductor on the train, the station agent, and now the fat man. His lack of results was not unusual. It would be rare that anyone would remember a certain woman out of all the flow of humanity headed toward Virginia City.

The stages were pulling away, raising twin streaks of dust behind them. When all the coaches were in motion, the air would be gray with dust, and it would cling stickily to damp, sweating skin. Rash had heard there were rest stops along the way. Perhaps he could talk to a few of the drivers at one of them tonight. Otherwise, he would have to wait and catch them in Virginia City. He hoped the incident with the fat man had not set the drivers against him.

He turned his head and called to the fat man, "Where can I find a livery stable?"

The fat man pointed with alacrity and said, "A block down the street, mister."

A faint grin was on Rash's lips as he moved off. The fat man had learned a few manners—at least toward him.

He walked a dozen yards down the street and passed an old and dilapidated buggy drawn up to the walk. A sorry horse was between the shafts, its head bent, its eyes patient and resigned. An elderly man sat in the seat, his head drooping almost as much as the ancient horse's. His eyes were closed, and his face was gray, either from pain or exhaustion.

A woman stood on the far side of the buggy, trying to swing a heavy piece of luggage up into it. The luggage was as beaten as the buggy, and Rash saw the cord tied about it to keep it from flying to pieces. The woman swung it up, and Rash heard her pant for breath. She couldn't raise it high enough, a corner caught the edge of the buggy, and the heavy article bounced back, almost tearing from her hands. She set it on the ground and straightened to catch her breath. Rash flashed a glance at the elderly man. His eyes were still closed, and Rash saw the labored rise and fall of his chest as he struggled for breath. Sickness, he decided, or the man would be helping her. He stepped around the buggy and said, "May I help, ma'am?"

He seized the baggage and effortlessly lifted it into the buggy. He straightened and looked into a pair of level, appraising eyes. He was not sure of the color of those eyes. There was green in them, mixed with a blue or gray. He could be certain of one thing. He saw a coldness there, amounting almost to a dislike.

She was younger than he thought at first impression. Not over twenty, he guessed. Her face had faint color, put there by her exertions with the luggage and the heat of the day. It was a finely molded face, the nose cut on delicate but determined lines. The lips were soft and alive with mobility. She had a magnificent crown of hair with a glowing, coppery sheen to it. Rash appraised in turn, and his appraisal overwhelmed hers. She took her eyes away first and stared at the ground.

She said stiffly, "May I thank you?"

"Not if it displeases you," he drawled. He was regretting the impulse that had prompted him to aid her. He had no interest in women, and he never expected to have again. Once a man was burnt, he was crazy to stick his hand into the fire again. But the growing dislike in her eyes angered him, and he said, "It's surprising how little manners a man finds in this town."

She had the grace to turn a deeper color, and he saw the increased glow in her eyes. An angry glow, for that hair and the cut of her chin proclaimed a quick and ready temper.

He touched his hat and said, "It's been a pleasure helping you."

HE MOVED down the street, hearing her quick suck of enraged breath. The picture of her face was very vivid before his eyes, and he resisted the impulse to look back. He heard the sound of the buggy wheels and still did not look around. She was forcing the old horse hard as she went by, and the wheels churned up large clouds of the powdery dust around Rash. His lips twitched at the corners as he plodded through it. A hot-headed redhead. A dangerous combination for any man. His little flash of humor faded. He didn't want any woman attracting him, and he admitted she had momentarily done so. He speculated on who the man in the buggy with her was, then dismissed both of them from his mind.

He asked the livery stable attendant the same question he had asked the fat man, and the attendant gave it more courteous consideration. He shook his head and said, "Maybe she came through here. But I sure can't remember her."

Rash thanked him and swung into the saddle that went with the horse he purchased. It fitted the horse; it was an old, battered piece of leather that had long ago seen its best days. He nodded a return to the man's wave and rode out into the street.

The road toward Henner's Pass was well marked by the slowly settling dust clouds raised by the passage of the stages. He turned his head and saw that the last one was just now pulling away from the station platform. He wondered for how many days traffic like this had gone over this road, and how many more days it would continue. Until the ore was exhausted, he thought, or until there were no more claims available to newcomers.

He guessed there was a foot of dust on the road, and it was badly cut by the passage of heavy wagons. It abounded in holes, and he let the old horse gingerly pick its way around them. The road began to rise sharply, and in the heavy fog of dust, he had to depend upon the animal's instinct to stay on the road. Where it wound around some of the steep turns and the small breeze blew the dust away, he could look down upon a sheer drop to his right. He hastily steered the horse toward the inner side of the road. His pace was not fast, but he thought that by now he should have caught up with some of the stages. He couldn't even hear the sound of their wheels, and he wondered how these drivers dared to move a stage that fast upon this torturous, blind road.

It was a little better in the higher altitudes, for the breeze was stronger here, sweeping the road clear of the choking dust. He lifted his head as he heard the rattle of wheels. The sound came from behind him, probably made by the last stage he had seen pulling out. He could not see the stage, for the road wound too sharply here, limiting his vision to a few yards before and behind him. He kept the horse moving steadily forward, not trying to keep ahead of the stage. He was willing that it pass him any time it was ready.

AS HE CAME into a sharp bend, he heard wheels again, and this time the sound came from in front of him. He was making better time than he'd thought, to catch up with one of the wild men driving the stages.

He came out of the curve, and saw the red-headed girl's buggy ahead of him. She was driving, and the gray-faced man sat stiffly beside her. Both of them were too engrossed in watching the treacherous road to notice Rash's approach. Rash felt a surge of sympathy for her as he noticed the rigid set of her shoulders. She was scared stiff, and well she might be on this road.

He was even with them before she was aware of his presence. He stifled an impulse to call to her, remembering her words in Folsom. He didn't turn his head as he passed, but he felt her eyes upon him.

He forced the horse to a harder pace until it had passed the buggy. The horse was blowing hard now, but a hundred yards ahead Rash saw that the road leveled out for a short space. He could stop there and give the tired animal a breather.

He was just pulling up when the sound of wheels behind him seemed louder. He turned his head and saw the heavy stage rapidly overtaking the light buggy. The driver kept to the inside of the road, forcing the girl to the outer edge, and a yell of warning rose in Rash's throat.

It came out in a choked burst of sound as he saw the frightened girl get too far over. The road was wide enough for two vehicles to pass, but it would take cool nerves to hold steady while it was being accomplished. At best, there would be only a couple of inches of clearance, and the bulky stage looming over the girl completely unnerved her. Rash saw her edge even farther over. The outer wheels of the buggy teetered on the road's edge, then suddenly slipped off into thin air. The inner wheels rose, and to Rash's horrified eyes, everything seemed to be moving in slow motion. He saw the man hurl himself from the tilting buggy seat, but the girl was not going to get free. He jerked his horse around and spurred down the grade. He had a confused impression of the buggy flipping off into space, of a tiny figure hurtling through the air, and his throat was so tight his breathing made a rasping sound.

The stage driver had no intention of stopping. He stood up, lashing the teams to greater effort, and as Rash pounded by

him he fixed that red, beefy face in his mind in the tiny instant before he was past. He would remember that face, he would find that driver again.

He threw off where the buggy went over, seeing that the man was already scrambling shakily to his feet. He looked over the side and was momentarily sick. It was almost a sheer drop, and it seemed to go on forever. A few stunted pines and bushes struggled for footholds in the craggy wall, and here and there a boulder was perched precariously. It looked as though it were two thousand feet down to where a little stream tumbled down the bottom of the canyon.

The sickness that started in the pit of his stomach threatened to sweep up into his throat, and for a moment his eyes refused to focus. He caught a hazy glimpse of color against a bush half a dozen yards from the road's edge, and his heart started beating again. Behind him, he heard the man's voice raised in a weak call, but he didn't look around. He stared downward with painful intensity. His eyes were not playing him tricks. That splash of color was moving; at least the girl was conscious.

He yelled, "Hold on. And don't move. I'm coming down."

He found precarious foot and handholds and inched his way down the cliff toward her. The fear in him was a queer thing, and he could not place its cause.

THERE was fear in her eyes when he reached her, but her face seemed composed enough. A branch or the rough scraping of a rock had torn a long, shallow scratch across her forehead, not dangerous or deep, for it barely oozed blood. Her dress was torn at the shoulder, and the undergarments beneath it had been ripped, and he saw the bared upper half of a softly rounded breast. The sight shook him, and he could not analyze his feeling. Not lust; it went deeper and was more tender than that.

He saw the white outlines of her knuckles as she gripped a branch, and he said huskily, "Are you all right?"

It took a time for her to nod, as though she had to debate the question from all sides. "I think so," she said finally.

"No broken bones?"

Again she paused before she shook her head.

His relief brought a grin to his face, softening its harsh outlines. She stared at it, surprise in her eyes, then slowly an answering smile reflected on her face.

He said, "We'll take it easy. We'll make it back okay."

A thought struck her, and she cried in dismay, "My father. Is he—"

Rash nodded assuringly. "All right. He'll be worring about you."

A little stream of pebbles and dirt cascaded down around them, and he looked up and saw the man peering fearfully over the edge.

"See?" he said and pointed upward.

He saw the tension go out of her and raised his voice in a yell. "Stand back. We're coming up." He wanted no dislodged earth or rocks slamming down at them.

He had to pry the first couple of her fingers from around the branch. He kept talking to her in a low, soothing voice, admiration growing strong within him. She was filled with terror, the rigidity of her fingers told him that, but one would never know from looking at her face.

She went ahead of him, and he carefully guided her feet into tiny niches and crevices. It took a painful time for them to make the ascent, for he would not let her move until he was certain of the solidity of her grip and foothold. He was weak and trembling, when he finally clambered over the edge. He walked several steps, letting the feel of the solid road erase the shakiness from his legs. He came back, and she was sitting down, her head lowered. The man hovered over her, murmuring solicitious words.

She raised her head and looked at Rash, and there was only appraisal in her eyes—no dislike. She said, "Again, I have you to thank."

He wondered what was running through her mind, what was behind those words.

They almost sounded as though she were reluctant to say them.

Her breast was nearly exposed, and he saw the smooth, white expanse of her throat, the pulse beating hard at the base of her neck.

Her face suddenly turned a violent crimson, and her hand snatched at the torn dress and pulled it back into place.

Rash turned his head and said gruffly, "I don't think that scratch is too bad."

When he looked arund, she was on her feet, one hand still holding the dress. With the other, she touched her fingers to the red line across her forhead, lowered her hand and looked at the stain on the fingers. She said wonderingly, "I didn't even know I had it."

Rash looked at the gray-faced man. "Are you all right?" he asked. The man was trembling, but the reaction of fear and tension could be causing that. The knee of his trousers was torn out, but otherwise Rash could see no harm.

The man nodded without replying and placed one arm protectively around the girl's shoulders.

RASH MOVED to the edge of the road and looked down. He thought he could see the dark, shapeless blur of the buggy far below him, but at the distance he could not be sure. The girl came to his side and stared into the depths.

She tried to laugh, and it came out a shakey, broken sigh. "All our baggage is down there. And poor Nelly."

Rash said doubtfully, "I might climb down there and see about your things."

She emphatically shook her head. "You will not. I'm grateful enough for our lives."

Worry wrinkled her forehead as she looked at the older man. "Though how I'm going to get father to Virginia City I don't know. He's been so sick."

Rash could see that. He said gruffly, "Isn't there a rest station near?"

She nodded. "It may be three or four miles ahead."

He looked at the slanting rays of the sun. Already the bottom of the canyon was in deep shade. He thought they could make the station before dark. He said, "If he can ride, we'll do all right."

The older man's tone was indignant. "I can ride. Leah babies me more than is necessary." He smiled at Rash and thrust out his hand. "If I haven't said thanks before, it's not because—"

Rash nodded and clasped the hand. He could see the sincerity in the tired face, and he did not want him to go through the embarrassment of trying to put his feelings into words. He said, "I'm Rash Donovan."

"Enoch Redford," the man answered. "And this is Leah."

Rash said, "We'd better be moving, if we want to get off the road before dark."

He helped Redford into the saddle and turned to give Leah a hand up.

She smiled and shook her head. "I prefer to walk."

Rash did not miss her scrutiny of the horse. She had correctly evaluated the animal for what it was. A double burden would leave it a staggering wreck. He felt his face burn and knew a corresponding irritation. What did he care what kind of an appearance he made in her eyes? Still, he wished he had a better horse and trappings.

They plodded ahead of Redford, and Rash kept his stride short and slow. Four miles in level country and four miles in the mountains were far different matters. Each step here tore at the leg muscles, and the lungs labored and pounded, never quite getting enough air.

He watched Leah out of the corner of his eye. He saw the dust film blot out the fresh, young color in her face, he saw the first drooping of the mouth corners and knew that fatigue was mounting. Somewhere during the first few steps she had accomplished a hasty repair job on her torn dress, for she no longer had to hold it in place. He thought her hands must be quick and deft, for he had not seen her.

He wanted to put his arm under her shoulders to bolster her step. It had been a long time since he had felt any tenderness toward a woman, and he put this pre-

sent feeling down against the lonely years. He did not want the feeling, he would not let it grow, and he moved a step farther from her. He felt the force of her eyes upon him, and he stubbornly refused to look her way.

He pointed out the rest station. Its outlines were shadowy and blurred in the gathering darkness. She laughed and said, "I'm glad. I don't know when I've been so tired."

HE STARTED to smile. She had spirit; never once had she complained, and he knew how her muscles must be aching, for his own were setting up a dull protest. He drove the smile back and growled, "A hot supper and a bed, and you'll be all right." He looked at her, his face coldly wooden.

The mirth of shared humor between them quickly vanished from her eyes, and her face was as stiff as his. "And you'll be rid of your burden," she said flatly.

He nodded and felt a little shame. But better smash it now than let something grow that could hurt later.

There were three stages lined up before the station, probably the last three that had left Folsom. No teams were in the traces, and he supposed the passengers and drivers would spend the night here. The other stages he had seen at Folsom had apparently left early enough to drive on to the next station.

His eyes were hard as he hoped that one particular driver was here. He had only a flash of the man's face to remember, but it was vividly stamped in his mind. That red, beefy face with its thick lips, the mouth open wide with its swearing and yelling. No, he would have no trouble in recognizing it, if he saw it.

He said awkwardly, "If you need—"

Her chin was high, her eyes direct and challenging. "If you're offering us money, Mr. Donovan, don't. We have enough."

She stalked on ahead as soon as her father was on the ground, and Rash watched her go. He had an odd sense of loss.

He found feed and water for the horse and turned from the little shed behind the larger log house. From inside, he could hear sounds of revelry. It sounded as though the passengers were trying to forget the trip behind them, or perhaps it was the prospect of the remaining part of the trip they were trying to wash away.

He needed food and rest, and started around the corner of the station house. Three men were ahead of him, and one of them was the driver he wanted to find. The man was talking to the other two, and Rash saw him throw back his head and burst into laughter.

Rash stopped short, anger boiling in him. Rash recalled the fright in a girl's eyes as he slowly moved forward. The muscles along his shoulders were bunching and hardening.

The beefy-faced driver was saying, "This road is getting worse every day, all cluttered up with everything that can roll. Getting so a man can't make any time any more." His tone took on a boastful note. "I was the last away, and I'd have made it to the station, if a rim hadn't come loose."

One of his listeners bobbed his head in admiration. "You caught up with me anyway, Mack. I can't drive this road like you do."

The other listener was an older man, his hair almost white. His head was cocked as though he weighed Mack's words. "I don't know, Mack," he said. "What good is all this hurrying? Where's it get a man?"

Rash stepped to the group before Mack could reply. His voice was low as he said, "I can tell you what your hurrying did. It ran a buggy off the road a couple of hours back."

Mack started at him, and there was no recognition in his eyes. If he had seen Rash spurring past him, he didn't remember it.

He growled. "Where's it concern you? I got a schedule to make. If things can't keep ahead of me, then they'll get run over or off."

The other two watched with curious faces. Anger was a whip lashing inside Rash, but it didn't show in the level tone

of his voice. "A girl was driving that buggy. She went down the mountain side."

RASH HEARD a suck of breath from the older man, but he couldn't tell what it signified.

Mack growled, "Hell, mister—"

Rash hit him then. He drove a hard set of knuckles into the thick mouth, snapping short the remainder of the sentence. The force of the blow knocked Mack back a few feet. A stunned look was on his face, and blood spurted from his split lips. He smeared a hand across it, crimsoning the lower half of his face. With an enraged bellow, he sprang forward, and Rash set himself to meet the charge. He was taller than Mack, but Mack had a bulky chest and powerful shoulders and arms. His legs were thick and muscular, and the weight was about even.

"I'll knock your damned head off," Mack yelled and threw a wild fist.

Rash jerked his head aside, feeling the breath of the fist as it grazed his cheek. He had power in front of him, raw, animal power that would take considerable battering. He doubted that a few punches would send the man down and keep him there, and he set about wearing him down.

He put a fist just under the breast-bone, drawing a harsh grunt out of Mack. He pumped two lightning-fast blows into the face, feeling flesh flatten and pulp under his knuckles. Mack kept boring in, his swearing coming between grunting gasps for breath, and the ferocity of the wild blows never diminished. He has power and little else, Rash thought, and he grew a little careless, or else Mack got somewhere near the range. Rash slipped aside from one fist, but another took him a glancing blow just above the left eye. He was right about the power. It rang bells in his head and put water in his eyes. It broke him backward, and with a triumphant bellow, Mack sprang at him.

Those two huge arms clamped about Rash's chest, the hands locking together in the small of his back. Mack's hard head was pressed tight under Rash's chin, and the pressure started. It was bad from the start, and it grew steadily worse. After a few seconds of it, Rash was gasping for breath, and the forehead pressed against his throat made his breathing difficult. His eyes were beginning to swim, and things were turning black.

A momentary panic made him expend his strength in a useless thrashing around. The blackness was worse, and his lungs were on fire. His throat felt raw and scraped where Mack's stiff, bristly hair rubbed against it, and the man's hands, digging into his back, felt as though they would snap his spine.

He went limp in that vise-like grip, sagging toward the ground, and he heard the satisfied grunt in Mack's throat and felt some of that awful power slacken. He expended all his strength in one mighty burst, springing backward against the slackening grip. The hands scratched frantically for a renewed hold, but Mack's reflexes were an instant too late. Rash was free and backing away, giving himself time to pump fresh air into his lungs. His eyes cleared, and he stared bleakly at the circling Mack. He was vaguely aware that a crowd had gathered, drawn by the noise of the fight. He had set out to punish this man for his brutality, and it had become a far greater job than he expected.

HE SAID, "All right, Mack," and stayed outside those pawing hands. He made lances of his fists, throwing them with sharp, stinging effect into Mack's face. In a few moments he had the face cut to pieces, and still he threw those blows from long range, knowing it was not yet time to move in close. He had one taste of the power in those arms; he wanted no more of it.

Mack rushed at him, his pain and anger forcing him into blind, senseless charges. He tripped over his own feet and went down. He sat staring stupidly about him, his face a dripping, bloody mass.

"Get up," Rash said. "I want you to remember this for a long time."

He heard a little gasp and jerked his head around. Leah stood at the fringe of

The buggy flipped off into space, the girl hurtling through the air

the crowd, her face white, her eyes fixed in appalled fascination on the bloody ruin of Mack's face. She looked back at Rash, and there was a dawning terror in her eyes. She suddenly covered her face with her hands and fled. Rash's mouth was a hard, bitter line.

Mack was climbing clumsily to his feet, and Rash moved in on him. He had intended further punishment for the man, but now he wanted this over as quickly as possible. He speared a left hand into Mack's mouth, his knuckles slipping against those broken lips. He pumped in the blows, and blood spattered under each of them.

It took a dozen blows, with everything he had in each of them, to put Mack down. A tired sigh slipped past Mack's lips, he rocked back and forth, then slowly started down. He fell apart all at once, and pitched forward on his face. He jerked a little and was still.

Rash glared at the crowd, and it retreated a little before the wildness in his eyes. He stared at Mack's two companions and saw murderous hatred in the younger man's face. He locked eyes with him for a long moment, then the other man looked

down at Mack and dropped on his knees beside him. Rash looked at the older man. He saw no hatred in his eyes, only a calm weighing. He turned and staggered toward the horse trough in the rear of the building, forcing his wobbly knees to support him.

He stripped off his shirt and washed, wincing at the sting of the water in his cuts. Mack had landed more than Rash had thought. In the heat of the fight, he had not noticed all those blows. He grimaced with disgust as he put his shirt back on. The front of it was a mass of blood, most of it from Mack.

A voice behind him said, "Never thought I'd see Mack whipped."

He turned and faced the older of Mack's two companions.

The man handed him a sack of tobacco and paper. Rash looked at the twinkle in those eyes and accepted them.

The man said, "I'm Linus Overhill. Drive one of the stages."

Rash murmured his name, his eyes questioning.

Overhill guessed at the thoughts running through Rash's mind and shook his head. "Mack's too much of a bully to suit me. Some of the younger drivers think he's cock of the heap, though. You'll have quite a few remembering this fight tonight."

Leah would remember it, Rash knew. The horror he had seen in her eyes would stay with him for a long time.

He said coldly, "He forced a girl's buggy off the road, trying to pass her. He never even stopped to see what help he might give."

OVERHILL nodded. "Sounds like Mack. He's always got to be tops in everything. He's got to drive faster than anybody else, he's got to be harder and tougher than the next man. Watch him, Donovan."

Rash nodded without replying.

Overhill said shrewdly, "The girl watching the fight? She the one Mack forced over?"

Again, Rash nodded.

Overhill said, "Better tell her your reasons, son. That was kinda brutal for a woman to see."

"I'm not interested," Rash snapped.

Overhill shook his head in patient disagreement. "Maybe you just don't know it yet, but you are." Rash growled, and a grin grew on Overhill's lips. "That's your business," he said, and Rash was relieved that the old man intended pushing the subject no further.

He sat down with his back against the wall of the station house. He drew deeply on the cigarette, and although the smoke stung his tortured lungs, it tasted good. His eyes brooded into the distance. He wondered if Overhill had hit upon the correct answer and angrily dismissed the conjecture. He was interested in no woman.

Overhill sat down beside him, sighing with animal pleasure. He rolled a cigarette and said, "Lots of traffic going over this road now. You wouldn't believe how Virginia City has grown."

Rash grinned. He had been abrupt, and still Overhill's friendliness persisted. He said, "I don't see how you handle those heavy stages on parts of this road. The dust alone—"

"Ain't it hell?" Overhill agreed. "Occasionally there's a smashup, but it's usually caused by whisky or bad driving. Nobody been killed yet. A few broken legs and arms. I've traveled over these mountains so often I can tell where the road is by the sound of the wheels, even when I can't see it. When they rattle, I know I'm on hard ground. When they don't rattle, I look over the side to see where she's going."

Rash thought of the man and woman he was hunting. They had been out of his mind for a longer stretch this evening than any time during the past two years.

He described them with slow, meticulous words, trying to keep the bitterness from his tone. He was aware that Overhill's eyes were searching his face, but he didn't look at him.

Overhill was silent for a long moment after Rash had finished. He finally shook his head and said, "If I saw her, I sure don't remember her. Good-looking woman

from what you say. I sure oughta remember her."

Rash felt tired and beaten, and he wondered if he would ever run across her or McKean again.

Overhill said gently, "Lots of people in Virginia City. Drawing them from all over the country. A man might run across anybody there."

His eyes were curious, but he asked no questions, and Rash was grateful for that.

His belly grumbled, and he remembered he had not eaten. He stood up and said, "I'm hungry. Join me for supper?"

Overhill shook his head. "Already ate." He stood up and beat the dust out of his pants. "You watch Mack, son. He won't forget tonight."

Rash nodded and started away. He remembered Leah and her father. He did not intend to be burdened with them the remainder of the trip, but he could not leave them stranded here.

He asked what the fare was to Virginia City and fished out the amount Overhill named. "That girl and her father are here." His tone invited no comment. "Can you take them on into Virginia City?"

Overhill soberly nodded and accepted the money.

Rash started to say something else, then abruptly walked away. The sooner he forgot Leah Redford, the better off he would be.

He had more aches and bruises than he realized, when he stretched out for the night. Sleep would not come for a long time. He kept seeing a pair of eyes that held approval, appraisal, and horror— all directed at him. He swore softly and turned over on his side.

RASH WAS UP long before the stage passengers were stirring in the morning. He wanted to see none of them.

He rode through beautiful country, but he was too absorbed with his thoughts to be much aware of it. It was pine country, with gigantic forest standing in bold outlines on opposite sides of the mountains. The air was sweet with flowers, and torrents of snow water plunged down every ravine, The country seemed soft and gentle after the hot aridity of Arizona and Southern California. Under the right circumstances a man could be happy here.

The grade took a downward plunge toward the American River crossing. While he had never traveled this road before, he had asked enough questions to be certain of where he was. From the Glenbrook Station at Lake Tahoe he had been told he could see Carson City. An hour after that, and he would arrive at Virginia City.

He had an early enough start so that none of the stages overtook him. He did pass two long pack trains, the animals strung out for many yards and all burdened with packages of every size and description. The packers hailed him with good-natured comments, and he lifted a hand in response. He pressed on through Carson City, resisting the impulse to stop and ask the old questions. Virginia City was the hub. He would start his quest there, and if necessary work back.

The traffic on the streets of Virginia City astounded him. The streets were packed to the point of suffocation with horsemen, pedestrians, and wagons. The thick press kept movement to a slow crawl, and Rash utilized the slowness of the pace to observe this fabulous city. He passed the open doors of saloons and did not see how it was possible to get another customer inside, and still men were trying to shove through the doors. Restaurants and hotels were filled to overflowing. Clothing stores offered their wares on placards in the windows. The prices made him wince. He rode by the Wells Fargo station, and it was heaped with goods and packages. He saw a livery stable ahead and edged his horse toward it. A man on foot could make better time than a horseman.

The livery attendant spat an amber stream into the dust and asked, "How long you staying?"

Rash shook his head, and the livery stable man grinned. "Letting the country decide for you, huh? It takes some a week, some a month, and some stick." His eyes ran shrewdly over Rash. "Looks like you might be one of the stickers."

Rash grinned and joined the throng on the walk. He was jostled and pushed by men dressed in suits of the finest broadcloth and immaculate white linen shirts. They in turn were shoved rudely aside by men in rough red and blue flannel shirts, their boots mud-caked, their hands dirty and horny from toil in the mines. It was a cosmopolitan crowd of Americans, Frenchmen, Germans, and Irish. Now and then, a half starved-looking Paiute or Washoe Indian tottered along the curb with a heavy load of fagots on his back.

MOUNTAINS surrounded the city, their slopes still streaked with snow. Mounds of freshly turned dirt dotted those slopes like anthills. Rash saw a few substantial houses and buildings, but they were mostly frame shanties, tents of canvas, blankets, brush, and even old potato sacks. Many a chimney was made of empty whisky barrels. He grimaced at some of the hovels of mud and stone, wondering how long some of these finely dressed men could live in places like that.

Speculators were huddled on every corner, and Rash could not help but overhear their conversation. Millionaires were counting their paper earnings, and the talk was of feet and dividends. They were strange words to a rangeman.

Tons of ore were piled in heaps along the curbstone, and heavy ore wagons were constantly bringing more into the city. Every store and office offered for purchase the sale of feet. It looked as though there were three assay offices to every other kind of business, and most of them were housed in tents. He looked into the open entrance of one and saw a small furnace, half a dozen crucibles, a bottle of acid, and a hammer. The assayer was a ragged man with a heavy growth of beard. He had a hungry look.

The assayer seized Rash's sleeve and tried to draw him inside. "I can sell you twenty feet for twenty dollars, stranger. Every foot is worth a thousand."

Rash said softly. "You look like you need those riches worse than I do." He moved on down the walk, leaving the assayer sputtering indignantly behind him.

After a block he stopped and looked helplessly about him. Where would he start; how would he begin? Virginia City had drawn people from all over the world, but how would a man go about finding two individuals in this teeming throng?

He shook his head and thought that perhaps his immediate need was for supper and lodgings for the night. He saw a tent ahead with a restaurant sign on it. He stood up while he ate a meager supper of pork and beans, fried potatoes, and coffee. The plate and cup were not too clean, and the meal cost him a dollar and a half. His eyes blazed at the price, but he made no protest. A man needed to make money and lots of it to live in this town.

He slept that night in a public bedroom, next to a bar. Twenty men were crowded into a room that should never have held over ten. If a man flung out his arm in his sleep, it would land across the face or body of the man next to him. The revelry in the bar kept up all night.

He awakened in the morning in a low frame of mind. He washed in the basin on the crude stand and dried on the dirty towel. These sorry accommodations had cost him three dollars, and he scowled as he walked out onto the street. At this rate, the city would eat him up before many days passed.

He spent the day plodding the streets, asking at hotels, at livery stables, at restaurants and at bars. No one had heard of McKean, and his description of his wife brought no gleam of response. The Wells Fargo office had nothing to tell him, and as he left it he wondered where he would start next. Men were on every side of him, but he felt alone and friendless. A man could be alone on the empty plains and not have a lonely feeling as deep as he knew.

TRAVIS SEIBERT paced nervously about the ornate room, his nervousness showing in the jerkiness of his stride. Where in the hell was that fool Mack? He had been sent for over an hour ago. Seibert made another turn of the room, pausing long enough to snatch a cigar out of the humidor on top of the desk.

He chewed off the end, lit the cigar, and resumed his pacing. There was no soothing in the smoke from the expensive weed and after half a dozen puffs he jerked it from his mouth and threw it on the floor.

He moved to the window and stared out at the teeming traffic of Virginia City's main street. He was almost afraid to stand here, afraid that out of that slowly moving sea of faces one of them would look his way. That would be followed by a shout of recognition, then the body belonging to the face would be charging toward him.

He looked at his trembling hands, and swore at himself. Who would recognize Travis Seibert as a man called Abel McKean two years ago? He was twenty-five pounds heavier, and his face was covered with a full beard and mustache. His own mother would have difficulty recognizing him now. The trembling did not leave his hands.

Someone had been asking yesterday for a man named McKean, and a woman. The stupid fool who had brought Seibert the information had not found out the questioner's name. Had Donovan picked up the trail again after all those months? Wild swearing welled up into Seibert's throat, and he choked it back. For over six months he had not heard of Donovan, and he couldn't believe it was Donovan making those inquiries.

He clenched his hands and held them out before him. They were steady. He looked out at the traffic again, and his lips below the mustache twisted into a snarl. He had come here almost broke, and in six months he had whipped this city. Give him another six months and he could come close to owning it all.

He looked about the elaborately furnished office. Every article in it proclaimed its owner was an affluent man. He looked at his clothes, his expensive boots. Rash Donovan would never take any of this away from him. Those dark eyes stared blindly out into the street, but the mind behind them was busily working.

He wondered if Rash Donovan knew him. But their meetings had been so few, how could he? He had been careful to stay out of Donovan's way, but still the man might remember. He would remember Candace, Seibert thought violently. She was becoming a damned nuisance with her constant preening and endless vanity. He had been thinking ahead when he had ordered her this morning to stay in the house until further notice. A harsh laugh escaped his lips. She would miss her afternoon promenade, with all the heads turning after her.

He turned and moved back to the desk. Suppose the stranger was Rash Donovan? What could a lone man do against all the power Travis Seibert had built here? A small, chilly voice whispered inside his brain, he could kill you; remember how people respected his ability with a gun? Do you think that ability is gone?

His hands started trembling again. He was glaring at them, when the sound of the opening door jerked him around.

SEIBERT jumped, and his face went pinched and tight until he saw who it was. He shouted, "What the hell do you mean by busting in here like that?" He did not give the astounded Mack time to answer. It took effort to regain control, but he managed it. He asked in a cold, flat voice, "Where have you been? I sent for you an hour ago."

Mack said sullenly, "I just got word." He advanced into the room, and he moved painfully.

Seibert stared at the battered face. He asked in surprise, "What happened to you? Who chewed you up and spit you out?" Surely it must have been an accident with the stage, for no man could batter Mack's features like that.

Mack's bitter cursing filled the room, and his tone was harsh. "He jumped me when I wasn't looking. He knocked me down with a club, and then kicked me."

Seibert's eyebrows went up. Mack was lying, it was in his face. He asked softly, "Are you admitting one lone man did all that damage?"

He raised a hand and checked Mack's new outburst of swearing. He was grimly amused at Mack's hurt. Mack was a useful tool, but he had become arrogant lately.

Someone had whittled him down to size, and he should be easier to handle. Seibert asked idly, "Who was he?"

Mack shook his head. "I never saw him before. He was tall, with big shoulders. He had gray eyes and a big nose. His chin was harder than a rock, and he moved like a cat. I'll find him again, and when I do—" He broke off and stared at Seibert. "You see a ghost?"

Seibert managed to shake his head. "You never heard his name?" There was a squeak in his voice he could not help.

Mack growled, "Overhill talked to him after it was over. He said his name was Rush Danvers or something like that. I don't need no name. I'll know him again, when I see him."

Icy fingers traced a mocking pattern up and down Seibert's spine. His worst fears were realized. The stranger in town was Rash Donovan. How he had patiently unraveled the trail Seibert didn't know, but he had, and he was here in Virginia City.

He managed to put the right degree of scorn into his voice. "So the great Mack got whipped. And he whimpers around about what he's going to do."

Mack's eyes were murderous. "I'll show you," he rasped. "I've got a couple of the boys looking, and—" He broke off, his little eyes going suspicious. "What's it to you?" he demanded.

Seibert was sure he had the right degree of carelessness in his voice. "Nothing," he said. "But if he whipped you once, I'm betting he can do it again. I'm betting a hundred."

Mack's hands opened and shut convulsively. "I'll take it," he yelled. "There ain't going to be any whipping, though. I'm going to kill him."

Seibert's eyes glowed with triumph. Mack was a brute of a man. Once roused, he never stopped. A month ago Seibert had seen him kick a man to death. Mack had had a fair crack at Donovan and had been badly beaten. The next time Mack would see to it that there would be no even chance for the other man.

Mack said, "What did you want to see me about?"

SEIBERT jerked his thoughts from Rash Donovan. "I heard the Redfords have moved onto the claim Onus Redford left them. The old man is sick, and the girl is hardheaded. Neither of them would listen to reason. I want them run off."

That claim of the Redfords was going to be valuable. After mining experts were positive the ore petered out in that direction, Gouge Eye had struck a huge vein, a vein that Seibert was positive angled onto the Redford claim. Only a few knew about the strike in the Gouge Eye hole. Seibert wanted that Redford claim before the knowledge became public property. He had written several times, making the Redfords a decent proposition. If they wouldn't listen to reason, they could take the consequences.

Mack's eyes glistened. He liked manhandling smaller people. "I can do it any way I want?"

Seibert nodded. "Take as many men as you think you'll need. I'll even give you all you want to handle that stranger of yours."

Mack cursed and walked out of the room. The slamming door quivered on its hinges. A cold fire burned in Seibert's eyes. He had raked Mack's pride, and he had dangled a hundred dollars before his eyes. Either should be enough to get him a successful job. Let Mack handle Rash Donovan, and Travis Seibert could stay entirely out of it. . .

Rash moved wearily along the outskirts of the city. He had spent another fruitless day. He was beginning to believe he'd never find Candace Donovan or Abel McKean. After he left Virginia City, where would he go? He had lost the trail in Los Angeles, but because the general direction of their flight had been north, he had worked in that direction. Perhaps he had been wrong in cutting inland. If he had kept on going north toward Oregon— He shook his head at the useless conjecture.

He smelled the smoke of cooking fires, mingled with the appetizing aroma of food being prepared. He heard men call to one another, and the loneliness inside him had a knife edge. He would have to figure on

another night's lodging and meal, further depleting his meager supply of money. When it was gone, he could go to work here. Prevailing wages in the mines were three dollars a day. Meals cost at least a dollar each, and after three meals a day, where was a man ahead?

He would leave as soon as he was convinced the people he was looking for were not here. Talking to some of the stage drivers had proven as unsuccessful as everything else. Several of them had refused even to answer him, and it had been effort to keep his temper under control. He had not seen Mack or Overhill again, and he supposed they were on the run to Folsom.

He moved along at the base of a slope. The tents and cabins had thinned out, but fifty yards up from him was a crude shanty. He stared at it, seeing a difference about it, but not quite able to place it. He caught it then. Someone had tried to make it homelike. There were gay curtains at the windows, and the usual pile of refuse was missing from around the door. Smoke trailed lazily out of the chimney, and nostalgia gripped him. A man needed a home, a place to turn to. He swore under his breath, wiping painful thoughts from his mnid.

RASH was quickening his stride when a voice hailed him. He stopped and turned unbelievingly, for the voice sounded familiar. He could not keep the rush of joy from his face as he saw Leah running down the hill toward him. A smudge of dirt was on one cheek, and her hair was in disarray. He thought he had never seen a woman look more beautiful.

"Mr. Donovan," she said pantingly. "I couldn't believe at first that it was you."

"Mister?" he said with a touch of mockery. "I hardly recognized my name. I answer more readily to Rash."

He liked the rush of color in her cheeks. "I like Rash better, too," she murmured. She gave him a flash of her eyes, and it had the power of a punch. "Are you?"

"Am I what?"

"Rash?"

"I'm Rash," he said gravely. "In most matters."

Her laugh rang out at the joke they had built between them, and he joined her. It had been a long time since he had laughed, and it was good.

She said approvingly, "When you laugh, you don't look so—"

She hesitated, and he prompted, "Mean?"

She shook her head. "Formidable was the word I was seeking."

She reached out and took his hand. "I was just getting supper, when I looked out the window and saw you. You must eat with us."

He sighed with deep pleasure. "You don't know how much that invitation means to me."

Enoch Redford was pleased to see him, and he insisted on showing him about the small place, while Leah finished getting supper.

Enoch said sheepishly, "My brother staked this claim and built the shanty. He died and left it to me. Leah thought I ought to sell it, but I wanted to hang onto it. It's going to prove out. The Gouge Eye isn't far from us, and there's a rumor out they've struck a rich vein. I'm hoping that vein runs under our place."

He stared into the deepening night. "If it does, then I can quit worrying about what will happen to Leah. It's been kinda tough on her the last few years. I ain't been able to work much. A man worries—"

Rash nodded agreement. He could understand someone worrying about Leah. He was slipping into that dangerous vein again, and he abruptly checked the thoughts.

Enoch said, "I got half a dozen letters, offering to buy this place. Each one a little better offer than the last. I figured if it was getting that valuable to them, we'd better come up here and see what was happening." He tone grew wistful. "I wish I had the money to sink a shaft. Guess we'll sit here until the land around us proves up, then sell for the best price we can get."

Rash wished he had the money to loan them. Why, a man might— He stopped that thought, too. It was too tied in with the girl.

He was relieved when she called them.

They went back to the shanty, and her face was clean and shining, and she had put on a fresh dress. There must have been approval in his eyes, for color crept into her face, and she looked at the floor. "I must have been a mess," she murmured. "I've been cleaning all day."

He emphatically denied the fact that she had ever been a mess, and she looked at him directly, little imps dancing in her eyes. He felt his blood stir and flow hotly, and it had been a long time since he had experienced such a feeling.

He never remembered a more enjoyable meal. The food was hot and excellent, and there was laughter and merriment. He pushed back from the table and said regretfully, "I can't eat another bite."

ENOCH glanced shrewdly at his daughter and said, "You two want to get some air. I'll clean up the table."

Leah laughed at the confusion in Rash's face. She moved outside, and he followed her, the beat steadily quickening in his pulses.

She faced him, pulled a few bills from her dress pocket, and said, "I have been hoping I would see you again. I wanted to return this."

He stared at the money.

"It's the money you paid for our stage fare," she said softly. "It was very kind of you, but we didn't need it that badly."

In his eagerness to make her understand he meant no offense, he stammered, only stopping when he realized that she was smiling at him.

"Mr. Overhill told me why you beat that driver so. He was the one who forced us off of the road." Her eyes searched his face. "I was fearful of you. Three times I saw you, and two of them you were engaged in acts of violence. I'm sure there is an explanation for your hitting that man in Folsom."

She saw that he did not intend to speak and went on, "I am afraid of violence. My brother was killed during a fight."

He stared at her, his eyes hardening. Now was the time to disillusion her completely. Something was growing in her eyes; a man would have to be a fool not to see it.

He said harshly, "Perhaps you should know why I came to Virginia City. I hope to find a man and a woman. I intend to kill the man, and maybe the woman."

He did not look at her as he heard her gasp. He thought bleakly, that will finish it. He was moving away, when she caught his sleeve. "But why, Rash? Why?"

He stopped and said, "The woman is my wife. She ran away with the man." He faced her, his face raw and violent. "I would have let her go and never lifted a finger. But they took my son with them. Chris was four, and he belonged with me. Not her."

His voice was cold and contained as he went on. "Chris died from neglect. He took a cold, and they didn't give it proper attention. They were too busy keeping ahead of me. I learned from an old woman in Tucson what happened. I saw his grave there."

"Oh, Rash!" she cried.

He felt the pressure of her fingers on his arm. "Good night," he said with curt formality. "Thank you for a pleasant meal." He turned and strode away. He thought he heard a little cry behind him, but he did not look around.

He walked toward the business end of town, feeling a steadily mounting rage at life. His eyes were unseeing as he shouldered men aside, and he didn't hear their growls of protest. He could admit it to himself now—he was in love with a redheaded girl with dancing eyes, and he had no right to be. And if she had had any feeling for him it was gone now, killed by his words to her.

A VOICE called his name twice before he realized he was being addressed. He stopped unwillingly, and Overhill came out of a doorway.

"Good to see you, son," he said, pumping Rash's hand. "Been wondering what happened to you." The old eyes sparkled. "Ever run into that redhead again?"

Rash said stiffly, "No."

He saw the skepticism in the old man's

eyes. Overhill didn't believe him, but he didn't press the matter.

Overhill said, "Saw Mack this evening. He's got two others with him. They're drinking heavy, and they got something on their minds the way their heads were together. Could be you. Watch yourself."

Rash said curtly, "Thanks."

He started to move on, and Overhill said wistfully, "Thought we might spend the rest of the evening together."

The appeal in the old man's face touched Rash, but he wanted to be alone. He nodded at Overhill and moved down the street.

He stopped in the first saloon he came to and had three fiery shots in succession. It was raw, potent stuff, and it burned his stomach and watered his eyes, but it had no power to dull the picture of a red-headed girl in his mind.

He moved out of the more crowded district, and the roar and the lights fell behind him. Here, the houses and tents were dark, and it reminded him that he had made no arrangements for a place to sleep. It seemed of no importance. At the moment, he was certain that sleep would never come to him.

His thoughts were too deep for him to notice the three lurking shadows concealed by the corner of the building. He was past the corner before they moved out at him. Some instinct or the slight sound of a shuffling foot warned him. He half turned, throwing up an arm, and the short, descending club, instead of hitting him squarely on the head, wasted part of its power on his protective arm. The blow was hard and unexpected, and it put a nausea in his stomach and a dizziness in his head. His knees were buckling, and the blackness was a thick cloak, dropping down over his head.

A fist smashed to his face, breaking his lips, and the sharp sting of the lacerated flesh drove some of the blackness away.

He learned in Tucson what had happened, and visited the grave

RASH blindly threw out his arms, and his hands found one of his attackers. He pulled him close and hung on, burying his face in the man's coarse shirt, desperately buying time for his head to clear. The man's swearing rumbled in his ear as he struggled to throw Rash off. Rash took blows in the small of his back and on the back of his head from the other two, and he kept twisting and turning his human shield, holding the man between himself and the others.

His mind was sharper now, and the first wave of sickness was leaving his stomach. He heard the enraged swearing of one of the men, and it had a familiar ring. It picked at his mind, and he tried unsuccessfully to place it.

He jerked his knee in a vicious upward thrust, and it rammed into the groin of the man he held. The man's breath puffed out in an explosive gasp, half whistle, half groan. He was sagging in Rash's hands before he let him go. He tried to step over the falling body, and the man had enough strength left to throw up a hand and entangle Rash's feet. The effort was not powerful enough to send him down, but he momentarily lost his balance, and his arms went wide, flailing for it.

The end of the club poked into his face, and he felt the grinding of his nose beneath it. He was kicked in the stomach, and sickness was a sour gagging in his throat. A triumphant yell rang in his ears, and it established an identity where the swearing could not. Mack, he thought, with almost patient resignation. It's Mack. Overhill warned me.

He forced his legs wide, trying to brace himself. His arms were so heavy, so slow. Fists crashed into his head from both sides, and those heavy, awkward arms couldn't block the blows. He was going down, blackness was approaching again, and its sheer weight forced him to the ground. He welcomed its oblivion, for it would stop the dull pain that jolted through his body with each blow.

He was not out when he hit the ground. He could still feel the kicks that thudded into his ribs and back. He floated on a heavy sea of pain, and each kick was a wave that tossed him high, then receded from beneath him, dropping him a frightful distance. His mouth and throat were choked with blood, and this would go on until they kicked the life out of him. A boot toe bounced off his chin, and it triggered that hovering blackness, letting it spring swiftly at him.

HE CAME TO, stirred, and groaned. He tried to sit up, and the effort sent a jarring wave of pain throughout his body, leaving him weak and panting. He waited until the weakness passed, then tried again. Each breath sent a stab of fire through his side, and he suspected broken ribs. He managed to sit up and could go no farther for a long while. He sat in the dusty, trampled street, his chin hanging low on his chest. He raised his head by cautious degrees, setting his teeth against the agony the movement caused. His breathing was painful through his battered nose, and he opened his mouth, greedily sucking in gasps of air.

It took three attempts before he could stand up, and he had to fight his treacherous legs to keep them beneath him. He tried a step, forcing back a moan. He was in worse shape than he had thought, and he supposed Mack and the others had thought him dead before they left.

He felt for his gun, and it was gone. The little money he had had with him was missing, too. His voice was no more than a whisper as he muttered, "Damn you, Mack. Damn you!"

He went down the street with shambling broken steps, thinking that the next would be his last one. One hand clutched at his side, and the other was partially extended before him as though it could help drag him along. The blackness followed him like a dull cloud, threatening to overtake him at any moment. He needed help and who was there he could turn to in this city? He thought of Overhill, but he did not know where the man stayed.

"Leah." The name came out of him in an unconscious gasp, and he turned blindly in that direction.

He didn't remember how he covered the distance there. In spots he floated in a fuzzy haze, and the pain was not so bad then. Then the fuzz would lighten, and the pain would be sharp and stabbing. The climb up the slope was hell. He crawled the last dozen yards, not realizing he was babbling her name. He thought the door opened, he was not sure. He did not hear her cry out, or feel the touch of her hands as she bent over him. The blackness was welcome now.

The struggle Leah and Enoch had in getting him into the cabin did not penetrate it. . . .

He opened his eyes and stared in puzzlement at the slanting rays of the sun filling the room through the window. He tried to figure whether it was the afternoon or morning sun, then realized the window faced east. It was early morning, and he had been unconscious since some time last night. He moved his jaws and winced at the answering response of soreness throughout his face. He touched his face, feeling the clean bandages on it, and that gave him reason for more thought. He sat up in bed, pulling the blanket from him. There was more bandage around his ribs. Someone had taken concerned care with him. It came back slowly—the struggle with Mack and the other two, the beating he had taken, and his instinctive turning to Leah for help. He must have reached her; the bandaging looked like a woman's work.

His pants were folded neatly over a chair, and his boots were at the side of it. That was not his shirt, and he supposed his had been torn or bloodied and that she had lent him one of Enoch's. He swung his feet to the floor, grimacing at the twisting catch in his side. He had experienced broken ribs before and he knew that familiar stab of pain. But if a man were careful in his movements, broken ribs were not too hampering. His eyes were bleak as he thought, next time, Mack, it will be with a gun.

He had been waylaid and clubbed, and it had gone far beyond the point where it could be settled with fists.

RASH gingerly slipped into the clothes, sucking in his breath at each movement. He managed a wry grin as he thought of what Leah would say. She would protest at his getting up so soon, but he could spend no more time in bed than was absolutely necessary. He had three people to search for now— McKean, Candace, and a stage driver called Mack.

He looked about for his gun, then remembered it had been taken last night. His eyes were like granite as he thought he could borrow one from Enoch, or buy one in town. There was pain back of that hardness in his eyes. Leah would turn further from him, when she learned what he had in mind.

He moved carefully to the door, opened it, and stepped into the kitchen. He expected to see Leah and Enoch there, and he wondered which one of them had given up their bedroom to him. He frowned at the emptiness of the kitchen. He started to call, then heard voices raised outside the house. Anger and excitement lifted the pitch of those voices, but he could still recognize Leah's. He moved toward the outside door, his face tense. He had not missed the note of fear in her voice, fear that even her anger could not down.

Before he reached the door, he saw the rifle leaning in the corner, and changed his course toward it. One of those voices, in opposition to Leah's, had been a heavy male voice. It had a familiar ring, but he could not quite place it. He picked up the weapon, saw shells on the shelf above it, and loaded it, the clicks sounding very loud to him. He paused and listened. Those clicks could not have been heard above the sound of the angry voices outside.

As he moved toward the door again, the heavy, male voice said, "You had your chance to get out. You waited too long."

Rash scowled. He should know that voice, but his foggy mind kept it from coming to him.

He heard Enoch swear, then yell, "You can't run us off. You can't—" He broke off as though he were panting for breath, then went on in a jerky tone, "I'll have the law on you."

The heavy voice interrupted him. "You think you'll reach the law?"

Rash's eyes glittered. From the tone, the speaker was enjoying the baiting of Leah and Enoch.

Leah's voice was tense with fear. "You can't! You'd be found out."

Rash sucked in his breath. It was time to take a hand.

The heavy voice came again before Rash stepped into the doorway. "Found out? Here? They don't even keep a record of deaths. Don't you fret your pretty head. Nothing's going to happen to you. I've got plans for you."

The voice lifted in a bellow, "Watch him, Jake."

Rash heard the pound of a few running steps, then a dull thud, followed by a gurgling cry. Leah screamed, shrill and piercing, then called frantically, "Rash, Rash."

The heavy voice said, "Shoot him—"

Rash stepped into the doorway, the rifle cocked at his hip. His eyes glistened with a cold light. No wonder that heavy voice had sounded familiar. He would spend no time looking for Mack. Mack had come to him.

The other one, Jake, was leveling a pistol at the fallen Enoch. Enoch lay on his side, his eyes closed, blood trickling from a cut over his right ear. Rash guessed he had tried to make a break for the house and Jake had been close enough to hit him with a gunbarrel.

Mack had hold of Leah's wrist, his eyes intent on Jake's actions. Leah seemed frozen by fear, her eyes dark splotches in a white face. Jake took a deliberate time with his aiming, his coarse features set in enjoyment.

Rash drawled, "I wouldn't, Jake."

JAKE'S head jerked around, and his eyes widened. He had no time to open his mouth or to swing the pistol around. Rash shot him in the chest, and the impact of the rifle slug slammed Jake backward. He tried to cry out, and it came out as a queer, twisted moan. His eyes were glassing over before he hit the ground.

Rash swiveled the rifle barrel toward Mack. He liked the wild fear stamped on the man's face. Mack tried to jerk Leah toward him as a shield, while clawing for his gun with the other hand. He had time for neither action, and the stamp of it was in his eyes. Rash shot him in the throat, and the blood spurted in a crimson stream before Mack started falling.

Leah stared at him with horror-distended eyes, then covered her face with her hands. Rash heard the sound of her sobbing and saw her shaking shoulders. He moved to Enoch first, knowing that Enoch needed the immediate attention. Enoch was already stirring and groaning feebly when Rash reached him. Rash helped him to sit up, and the old man's eyes opened and closed several times. Rash examined the cut over his ear. He pressed around its edges, feeling Enoch wince and pull away from him. He decided it was a severe bump and cut, but the bone beneath was not damaged.

He turned his head and called sharply, "Leah. Give me a hand."

His tone raised her head. For a moment, her eyes were dull, then they cleared. A little shiver ran through her, but she walked steadily enough toward him. Again, Rash knew that surge of admiration. She had been through a shocking experience, but her nerves were not buckling.

She helped him get Enoch into the house, and she bandaged the wound. When it was done, she said, "Rash, you shouldn't even be out of bed!" Her face almost broke before she could control it. "But oh, I am glad you are." Her voice lowered to a whisper. "They meant to kill him. And —" She could not go on, and he reached out and covered her hand.

"The big one was one of three who beat me last night," he said soberly. "Maybe Jake was in on it, too. I only recognized Mack. Why did they come here?"

Enoch shook his head in bewilderment. "Never saw either of them before."

Rash asked, "Mack wasn't the man who wrote you about your property?"

Enoch shook his head. "Somebody called Seibert wrote me."

"Then he's the man to talk to."

Leah stared at him, and he was afraid the horror was coming back into her eyes. She had time now to remember that he had shot two men.

She asked in a small voice, "Rash, you would have killed Mack for last night, even if he hadn't come here?"

He nodded, a slow, positive gesture.

She took a long moment in handling the thought, then her chin lifted. "I think I understand, Rash. There are times—" She breathed deeply, and her eyes were clear. "I wanted to kill him myself. It's the first time I've ever known that feeling."

He sat watching her, letting her work out the thought.

"For the good of the rest of the world," she said slowly, "men like Mack deserve killing." She nodded as though discovering a new and great truth. "And men like the one you're looking for." Her voice had a musing note, and there was no revulsion in it. "I always said there were other ways, but I was wrong."

She looked at him squarely; she knew what he had to do, and still her eyes did not retreat from him.

He looked at Enoch and said, "Feel like giving me a hand?"

Leah made no attempt to follow them. She knew the job ahead of them, and she engaged in no feminine rush of feeling about it.

Enoch had a mule, and Rash put a rope on the bodies and dragged them away. Neither he nor Enoch was capable of lifting them onto the animal. He steered the mule some five hundred yards from the house, quartering across the slope. He kept listening, and the quietness remained unbroken. His shots had not been heard, or if they had, they had pulled no attention. He wanted it that way, until he could learn what the thing had been about.

Enoch dug the shallow graves, then covered them. He looked at Rash and said huskily. "It could have been me in there."

Rash doubted it. He doubted that Mack would have given Enoch that much consideration.

He moved slowly back to the house, his mind filled with heavy thoughts. It seemed as though his quest was continually broadening. He had another man to look for, a man called Seibert.

LEAH met him at the door. She said, "Rash, I've been thinking about your search for your wife." She said the last word reluctantly, and he watched her with steady eyes.

She rushed on as though her courage might fail her. "You might ask in the houses in Virginia City." Faint color played in her face. "Those women usually know more about what's going on than anybody else."

His eyes lighted. "I never thought of that."

"Describe her to them. If she's here, or has been here, they'll remember. A woman notices those things more than a man does."

He nodded, and as he started to turn away she caught his arm. "Rash," she whispered. "Will you kill her?"

"I don't know," he said slowly. Even this late he still was not prepared to answer that question.

"It doesn't matter," she cried. "It doesn't matter what you do. But come back to me, Rash."

He saw it all shining in her eyes, and for a moment, he was struck humble with the magnitude of the gift. His arms went about her, his mouth hungrily sought hers, and she met his lips with all the fire and response in her. He lifted his head and said huskily, "Some way, it'll work out."

He went down the slope with slow, careful steps, Enoch's pistol at his hip. It felt a little strange to his palm, but it would do. He looked back at the bottom of the slope. She stood at the door of the cabin, one arm uplifted. He waved back, then turned toward the city.

He learned the addresses of the houses in Virginia City and patiently went from one to another. In each, he asked his questions of every girl he could find, and he drew the same negative answers. In the fifth house he found one of the six women who had been on the train with him. She eyed him sardonically and said, "So you finally decided to come around."

He grinned at her. She was a buxom blonde with a sense of humor in her eyes. The tartness of her tongue was caused by his rebuffs on the train.

He thought of his approach, then decided it was best to level with her. She had a shrewdness in her eyes that no mere male could fool.

He said gravely, "Not business, this time."

She sighed with mock wistfulness. "It's rarely business with your kind. Maybe that's why we notice you so much."

"I'm looking for my wife." He described Candace, and those searching eyes never left his face. He told her just enough of the truth to give it a ring, he omitted details as to why he wanted to find her.

The woman's eyes went soft. "And you can't live until you find her again?" She shook her head. "You're up against something tough, handsome. She's living in a high-toned place." She eyed Rash's worn clothing and again shook her head.

Rash's heart lurched, then steadied. His tone was hoarse as he asked, "You've seen her?"

The blonde nodded. "She bought a hat I wanted right out from under my nose. I followed her, out of curiosity. She's living in one of the biggest houses in town." She touched Rash's arm with a lingering touch of sympathy. "Maybe you'd better forget about her."

Rash said, "Give me the address."

The blonde sighed. "You're asking for it. I'm thinking you're going to add to the trouble you're packing."

TRAVIS SEIBERT'S eyes were panic-filled as he hurried along the street. Damn Mack, anyway. Damn him for a liar. Mack had said Donovan was dead, that he had been left dead after a brutal beating last night. Mack had lied. For Seibert had almost bumped into Donovan going into Tessie Harrison's house. For a moment he had thought his heart would stop beating as Donovan had looked squarely at him, but apparently Donovan had not recognized him. Seibert had hurried away, his breathing harsh in his throat.

It had not returned to normal, even after he turned the corner. He had to fight the impulse to keep from looking around. That would be a dead giveaway to Donovan. Any unusual interest in him would be a sure bid to capture his attention. What did Donovan want in Tessie's place—and where was Mack? If he botched the job of getting rid of the Redfords as badly as he had botched the Donovan job— Seibert swore deep in his throat.

He stayed around the corner from Tessie's house, peering out every now and then, hoping to see Donovan leaving. The tremble was back in his hands, and he cursed his rising panic.

Finally he saw Donovan step outside and look uncertainly in both directions, and he ducked hastily back lest Donovan see him. If Donovan came this way, he would have to hurry to get out of sight. He could not have Donovan seeing him again so shortly after the other time. He risked another glance, and Donovan was moving down the street in the opposite direction. Seibert's relief came out in a long sigh.

He waited until Donovan was out of sight, then hurried to Tessie's house. Tessie knew and respected him. She should, after the money he spent with her. He said abruptly, "Tessie, what did that tall stranger want?"

Tessie grinned. "He's looking for a woman. But not the kind we have here." Her forehead crinkled. "It's funny. But from his description it sounded like he's hunting your wife."

Seibert's face blanched. He made an effort and controlled his voice. "What did you tell him?"

Tessie shrugged. "I told him I was sorry I couldn't help him." Her eyes were curious as she watched him.

Seibert controlled his voice. "Thanks, Tessie. I was just curious." He moved out of the place at an ordinary walk, and only he knew how hard it was to keep from breaking into a run.

He should not have let Candace leave the house this morning, but she had complained so bitterly that he had relented. It had seemed all right after Mack had

reported late last night that Donovan was dead. Seibert knew now that he should have checked, but he had wanted to stay well out of it. He had depended upon Mack's hatred to do a complete job, and Mack had bungled.

His mind churned furiously. If Donovan were asking about Candace only today, then it was probable that he didn't know Abel McKean well enough to describe him. It looked as though Donovan hoped that by finding Candace he would locate McKean. Seibert shivered. Donovan was a remorseless hunter. How well Seibert had learned it in the past months. He thought wildly, I will not run any farther.

He quickened his stride toward his house. If Candace were not back from her shopping trip, he would have to find her. He had to get her off the streets as quickly as possible. If Donovan got one glimpse of her, it would all be over. His eyes suddenly gleamed. If Candace were not around for Donovan to find, that could mean permanent safety. No one here but Candace knew that Abel McKean and Travis Seibert were the same man.

His mouth was a thin, ugly gash as the thought enlarged in his mind. He felt no repugnance. Candace was becoming a nuisance. She demanded more and more, and her attractiveness for him had long since disappeared.

HE REACHED the house and hurried inside. He heard someone moving about in her bedroom and called, "Candace."

He pulled open a drawer and picked out the derringer. His hand concealed it as he moved toward the bedroom door. He stepped inside, and she turned from the mirror.

She smiled and said, "I bought a new hat, Travis. Like it?"

He looked at the absurdity perched on her head and nodded. "It's fine." He moved to her and placed his left arm about her, drawing her close. Surprise was in her eyes, and he knew its source. He had been cold lately. The derringer was gripped in his right hand, its muzzle almost touching her body. She was not aware of it; her eyes were intent on his face.

He murmured, "Candace, Rash is in town. I saw him."

He watched the surprise change to fear. "Oh, God," she moaned. "I thought by now he would have given up. He's still looking for us."

"Not us," he said. "Today he only asked about you. But if he finds you, he might find me."

He shoved the derringer muzzle hard into her stomach and pulled the trigger. Her body muffled most of the small report. He clapped a hand over her mouth, muffling her scream. He saw the numbness of shock in her eyes as he lowered her to the floor. He held his hand over her mouth a long time until he saw the glass in her eyes and the facial muscles go limp. He straightened and grimaced at the blood staining the carpet. He drew the blind, then walked to the front door and cautiously looked out. Everything seemed normal. He was sure that no passerby could have heard the shot. He would return tonight and dispose of her. If she were discovered in the meantime, he would swear he knew nothing of it, that he had been at the stage office all day. He had men working for him who would confirm that. He locked the front door behind him and went down the walk, the derringer in his coat pocket. He could dispose of it at the office. He looked at his hands. They were steady. The last link chaining Travis Seibert to the old name had been destroyed. . .

Rash moved slowly down the walk. The house was ahead of him, and his heart hammered. What would he say when he saw her, what would he do? All the accusations and recriminations that had been so long in his mind were suddenly unimportant. He kept thinking of Leah, of the concern that had been in her eyes. He made his decision and was surprised at the relief he felt. All he wanted from Candace was to know McKean's whereabouts. When he learned that, she could go, and he would be forever free of her.

He stepped up onto the porch and knocked on the door. His mouth was set in

a hard line as he waited. This was going to be a horrible shock to her. He waited, then knocked again, the echoes ringing hollowly throughout the house. He scowled at the sound. An empty house always seemed to give that kind of an echo. He moved around the house and knocked on the back door. He heard the same hollow echo. He would have to come back, perhaps nearer evening.

He moved down the side of the house, peering into each window as he passed. He came to one where the blind was drawn and started to pass it by. He saw that the blind was not all the way down and stooped to peer under it. His heart caught in its beat as he saw the inert hand and part of the arm, lying on the floor. He could not see more, but that hand and part of an arm were decidedly feminine.

He went back to the front door and tried it. It was locked. So was the back door. He moved to the kitchen's window, drew his gun, and broke a pane of glass with the barrel. He looked hastily around. The noise did not seem to draw anyone.

He reached in, unlocked the window, and raised it. He climbed inside and listened again. The heavy stillness almost had a sound of its own.

RASH opened the bedroom door and sucked in his breath. Candace lay face up, and that luxurious blonde hair he remembered so well was spilled in dissarray about her head. He saw the pool of blood, the face so white, the closed eyes, and he knew she was dead.

He knelt beside her, feeling mixed emotions tugging within him. There had been a few happy months with her, and the memory of them was a powerful force at the moment. Her discontent had started shortly before Chris's birth and had grown steadily until she ran away with McKean. That was the thing he should remember, but the other times kept slipping into his mind.

He stared at the still, white face, a hot stinging behind his eyelids. It would be a relief to cry, but the tears had been frozen inside him for so long that they wouldn't come. He felt an agony of frustration, of hurt and loneliness. He had found her, the trail was over, and he had accomplished nothing.

He reached out and touched the quiet hand, and the muscles in his face jerked. He felt warmth in the flesh, and he was shocked. He whispered, "Candace, Candace," and her eyelids fluttered open.

She stared unseeingly at him for a long moment, then a shaky smile touched her lips. "Rash," she whispered. "I've been expecting you. It took you so long, didn't it?"

He said wildly, "I've got to find a doctor."

She shook her head, a gesture so tiny he almost missed it. "No use, Rash. Find Travis Seibert. He and Abel McKean are the same. Travis stays much of the time at his office in the stage company's building."

"He shot you?"

She nodded, and her eyes closed.

Her face looked more white and still than it had before. Rush put an arm under her head and lifted it. He put his cheek close to her lips and could not determine whether or not he felt the tiny fan of her breathing.

She said, "Rash, it hurt me as much as it did you about Chris. I tried so hard—" Her eyes were open again, looking steadily at him, and he saw a certain strength in them, a strength coming from some small inner flame.

"It's all right, Candace," he said huskily.

She said wonderingly, "We were never made for each other, Rash. And it caused so much trouble." Pain twisted her features. "Rash," she gasped. "In the drawer over there. Money. Most of it is yours." She struggled to say something else, pushing up a little from his arm. "Take—" Her mouth sagged open, and the eyes went blank and unseeing.

He slowly lowered her head. He stood up and stared fixedly at her face. He felt a sense of grief, not grief because of any personal loss, but grief that such things had to be. He started out of the room, then turned and moved to the drawer. He found the money under a stack of clothing. He counted two thousand dollars out of the pile. That had been originally his, money

that she and Seibert had taken before their flight. There was more, but he put it back, wanting only what was his.

He looked back at the door. "Candace," he said. "I'm sorry." He softly pulled the door to behind him.

He went down the street, his eyes cold, his face so set that it looked all harsh angles. Passersby looked at that hard and bitter face and pulled away from him. He didn't even see them. It had been a long, hard trail. The end of it was in sight, and the thought of the end still did not fill that hollow in his stomach.

WHEN Rash walked into the stage company's office, a harassed man, sitting behind a paper-cluttered desk looked up and petulantly asked, "Yes?"

Rash slowly looked around the office. At the rear was a door marked private. The fire in his eyes had greater intensity. "That's Seibert's office, isn't it?" he asked.

The clerk drew to his feet. He was a little man, thin-shouldered and with the beginning of a stoop that additional years of paper work would make more pronounced.

"You can't go in there," he said. "Mr. Seibert left orders he would see no one. You can't—"

He squawked and rushed across to intercept Rash, and Rash swept him aside. He put his hand on the doorknob, hesitating before he turned it. The clerk pulled at his arm, and Rash turned his head and looked at him. The little man's face paled, and he fell back before those eyes. He said weakly, "I'm telling you, you can't—"

Rash threw open the door and took a step into the room. The fleshy man sitting behind the desk looked up. He wore a full beard, and to the best of his recollection, Rash could not remember seeing him before.

"Hello, McKean," he said softly.

He seemed the picture of indolent ease as he lounged a few feet in front of the door. Only the burn of his eyes announced his purpose.

Behind him, the clerk said, "Mr. Seibert, he insisted on coming in. I couldn't stop him."

Seibert's eyes were round with fear. He wet his lips several times before he could speak. "You— You— You've got the wrong man."

"Have I, McKean?" The softness was still in Rash's voice. "Candace didn't think so. She died in my arms, McKean. From your shot."

The indolence was disappearing from his figure. It was beginning to resemble a tightening bowstring.

Seibert said, "Wait. I can explain. I didn't mean to shoot her. It was an accident. She—" He looked at that remorseless face and realized his words were damning him. His face hardened from some inner, desperate purpose. Rash never took his eyes from him. He watched him with an almost detached curiosity. The man recognized the inevitable and was nerving himself for a break.

Seibert's hand flashed to the desk drawer. Rash saw beads of sweat on his forehead as he tugged it open. Seibert's breathing was a noisy, jerky thing, making a sound greater than the squealing, protesting drawer. Fear drove him, and the whimpering in his throat sounded like an animal in panic.

Rash let him get the drawer open, let the hand close about the butt of the gun lying there, let the gun start to lift. Then he drew. Seibert's gun was just pointing over the desk top, when Rash fired. The bullet hit Seibert between those fear-protruded eyes, and the face fell apart. Rash thought that the man knew no pain, only a numbing shock, and felt a momentary regret that his dying should be that easy. Seibert fell forward across the desk. He fell as limply as an empty sack, and there was no twitching, no evidence of life in him.

Rash faced the horror-stricken clerk. The man shrank into a corner, and Rash realized the still smoking gun was pointed at him. He lowered it and said, "The law can find me at the Redford's, if it wants me. You heard him admit killing the woman." He put the gun into its holster and moved past the ashen-faced clerk. The law might

make a cursory examination, but Rash doubted it would be more than that. The clerk would testify it had been self-defense, and there were Seibert's words and a dead woman.

Rash walked through the outer office. People were milling about outside the front door, drawn by the sound of the shot. He pushed his way through them.

He went down the street, his step heavy. It was over, and he should have known a great relief instead of that inner sickness. He thought somberly about the queer, meaningless purposes of man, and how their achievement rarely brought him peace.

Then his head lifted and his eyes brightened as he thought of a waiting girl. He had a new purpose waiting for him, one that would bring him that long-sought contentment. He had money in his pocket to help Enoch develop his claim, and that was another worthwhile purpose. He quickened his stride, disregarding the stab of pain it put in his side. He had a new life ahead of him, and the old, black thoughts dropped completely away.

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. A ten-point buck deer shot near Rifle, Colo. will almost surely be bigger than a ten-point buck shot near Kerrville in the Texas hill country. Howcome?

2. True or false, and why: corn is considered the best grain feed for a working cowhorse.

3. When coosie cooks a chuck roast for the cowhands, where does it come from, the front quarter or hind quarter of a beef?

4. You'll find the University of Colorado and Wayne D. Overholser (whose stories you've read in RANCH ROMANCES) located in a town near Denver whose name means "big rock." Name it.

5. What or who is a wagon boss?

6. In what single Western state could you visit all these towns: Albany, Athens, Boston, Canton, Carthage, Cleveland, Colorado City, Denver City, Eden, Dublin, Odessa, Mt. Vernon, Pasadena, San Diego and Atlanta?

7. True or false: there are no Indian reservations in Oregon.

8. In what particular respect does the barrel race usually differ from other horseback contest events in most rodeos?

9. Give a couple of cow country words or phrases meaning "good" or "all right."

10. What meaning do the terms Charolaise, Brangus and Santa Gertrudis have in common?

——*Rattlesnake Robert*

You will find the answers to these questions on page 129. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.

a fact story

The grotesque wraith seems to be searching for something . . .

Sand Devils

By Ferris Weddle

FIFTEEN MILES from Alamogordo, in south-central New Mexico, is located 176,000 acres of sand that is not sand. It is pure gypsum, as white as snow, and it is called The White Sands National Monument. But have you heard some of the legends about the sands?

At twilight, if you are fortunate, you might be able to understand the origin of one of the legends when you see the Pavlo Blanco, or White Wraith. The wind, apparently, is the creator of the wraith. A gust of wind climbs up a sand dune that may be forty feet high, picking up the powderfine gypsum. It revolves and twists, and abruptly it forms into what may be considered a human body. This sand devil skips across the dunes, along the crests, down the sides. It seems to be searching for something.

Spanish and Indian legend say that the wraith *is* searching, for it is the spirit body of a lovely señorita who seeks her

lover, who was lost many centuries ago in the sands. The explanation may not appeal to the scientific mind, but for those of us who are romantics at heart it is intriguing.

Other Mexican and Indian lore of the vicinity has fascinating frills, too. For instance there are red lakes formed when it rains. Legend says the red color is from the bloody battles fought between the Spanish and Indians, and between the Indians and whites later on. The scientists, of course, blast this as nonsense. The red is due to microscopic plants which arise in the water.

There is the case of the old Spanish cart, the *carreta,* which was disclosed by the shifting sands. What happened to the owners is an intriguing mystery. And on the west side of White Sands human tracks were found imprinted in gypsum rock—only these were not ordinary human tracks. They measured twenty-two inches long and were from eight to ten inches wide. Scientists have not tried to explain this discovery.

The Master Creator must get a great many chuckles from the efforts of mankind to explain the existence of the sands. Was it formed from the ashes of a volcano about sixty miles away? The geologists think not, nor was it made by a wash from Carlsbad Caverns. Possibly, say the logical-minded, a few million years ago the area was an inland lake. It dried up, and white crystals began to form, finally emerging into the great White Sands.

GEOLOGISTS have a more plausible story. The sands are located in the Tularosa Basin, and the basin floor, as well as the surrounding mountains, have layers of slab gypsum. Possibly the basin was once just a huge block of gypsum until the earth shifted, breaking it up. Rain and snow water, washing through the gypsum, dissolved it, carrying it into the lower areas. A gypsum lake was the result—and then the hot sun went to work, drying it up. The winds came along, picking up the particles and heaping them into dunes. This still goes on, the gypsum coming in from the mountains and up from the basin floor. So White Sands still continues to grow.

This growth has intriguing possibilities, for it is estimated that Alamagordo may some day—a few hundred thousand years hence—be covered by the shifting sands, because the undecided sands move toward this atomic-minded city at the rate of about eight inches a year.

Plant and animal life takes on weird aspects, too, in the sands and surrounding country. One botanist claims that some sixty-two plants grow in the sand's edges or nearby. There are mice and lizards and various insects in the white world of gypsum, too. They are unlike other members of the same species. They are white, like their environment; otherwise they would stick out like a sore thumb. Mice and lizards of the same species in the black lava ravines are black; and those in the foothills are red. It's all a part of nature's trickery—and common sense.

Sooner or later, people always ask: Are the sands valuable? Sure, gypsum is used extensively in the building trades. And if there were not a plentiful supply elsewhere in the world, White Sands has enough to supply the whole world for sixty thousand years. At least that's the claim, and also, it is said, if all the gypsum was loaded on freight cars there would be enough to encircle the earth some hundred and fifteen times.

Because gypsum is plentiful, however, White Sands is considered priceless as inspirational sand. Over a hundred thousand people visit the monument each year, and grandmother takes off her shoes alongside the grandchildren and has a wonderful time playing in the smooth sands. Just to have the dazzling white dunes, twisting into odd shapes up to sixty feet in height, against the blue-black of the mountains, is sufficient. And in the evening, with red staining the mountains and the desert country, White Sands is a white world of shifting, delightful patterns. It is a place of moods, and a place to bring on moods.

In the land near where Billy the Kid had his lusty heyday, the White Sands is an eye-catching snow desert where the winds will form sand devils or *el Pavlo Blanco.*

"Don't be bashful," Newt said. "Get it while it lasts."

COLT Collateral

By Paul L. Peil

WHEN HE GOT off the train, young Rollie Bonner sought the station's shade and stood wiping the cinder grime from his face. The heat, here in the open, was almost as bad as in that sweat box of a passenger coach. Then too, having spent several weeks in the cool cedar country around Austin, he felt this thicket heat all the more.

THE FAITH of his depositors was all this banker had to defend his reputation. . . .

Ordinarily, when arriving in Chaparral, whether on business or home leave, he would hurry uptown. Now he tarried until the train chuffed off, its woodburning engine belching black clouds into the brassy sky.

Still unable to shake his reluctance, he crossed the tracks and moved toward the straggly main street, investing his manner with a casualness he did not feel. He told himself again: it's just a rumor, nothing to it. However it had been strong enough to reach the capitol, and he knew rumors could shatter reputations, as well as banks.

There were vehicles here and there, and horses, and people on the walks, yet Chap-

arral's lethargy was a palpable thing. Born and bred in the "bresh," Rollie could read the signs. These folks were about licked. One more blow might do the job. He hoped he would not render that blow.

Reaching the small group before Barstow's general store, he felt his first urgency, but instead slowed his step. They returned his howdy, and one commented listlessly about things up in Austin. Rollie, trying to discount the tension he sensed in them all, was moving on when Clay Terry spoke.

"I know you didn't come home to go swimmin' in the crick, so it must be official." He was lounging in the store doorway, a booted foot propped on a nail keg, "We—I sure hope you find old Newt solid."

Bonner caught the sharpened attention of the men. He looked at Clay, not too long, for the lanky, tow-haired youth invariably rubbed his fur wrong. Clay needed someone to put a snaffle in his mouth and train him properly.

Rollie said, "Don't worry. Dad's solid."

There was a tight, squeezing silence. Someone cleared his throat. Clay, rubbing a hand along his levi-clad leg, stared into the street. And Rollie, suppressing his anger, studied the man behind Clay in the recessed doorway.

Barstow stood inside the fly-specked screen, a non-participant, as usual. Panatela smoke wreathed his jowled face, but Rollie could discern the smirk on it. Clay was a fool to work for Barstow, who always shoved a hireling out front while he remained in the background. Next thing, Clay would use the under-arm Colt doing Barstow's dirty work.

A grizzled cowman said, "We bank a heap of faith on Newt. He ain't never failed us. There's just whispering—"

Rollie nodded. "That's right. And a lot of anonymous letter-writing to the comptroller." Looking steadily at Barstow, he said, "But a man who whispers is too damned yellow to shout."

Walking on through the metallic blaze of midmorning, he tried to forget Barstow. The man was greedy. It was expressed in the sign over the tannery, at the town's edge; on the false front of the feed barn; there on the mercantile window. Each sign read: Barstow's.

Nothing else. Merely the name, possessively.

THE CHAPARRAL State Bank, Newton Bonner, Pres., was the only building of pressed brick in town. Rollie preferred the native adobe, which was cooler. Strangely, he always thought of this as a monument to his mother, now dead several years.

She had come from a fine home up in booming Dallas. Her menfolk were not rawhide cow-people like Newt's. They sat behind desks in buildings like this. Though his parents had been happy together, Rollie considered this a concession to her way of life on Newt's part. Newt was a better rancher than banker. In fact it was remarkable he had lasted ten years as a banker.

With his entrance, the sight of Sarah Terry at the teller's window produced in Rollie his usual quickening of pulse. They had grown up together, and he carried her picture in the snap-case of his watch.

She saw him, and her quick pleasure was genuine, but he had the impression she was not surprised. She seemed to be expecting him. He realized he would have only a moment with her, for his father was swiveling around in a chair back yonder.

She squeezed his fingers, her smile crinkling a slightly retroussé nose. "Hi, bank examiner. Hmm, circles under your eyes. Too much Austin highjinks."

"Too much railroad. Feel like I worked on it, instead of riding it."

He turned to watch Newt step outside the railing and join them. The senior Bonner had exchanged cowboy brown duck for twillcord, but he still rammed his pant legs into the tops of his kangaroo half-boots. And the tie was askew under the collar of his broadcloth shirt, the cuffs of which were folded up on his forearms.

His weathered, seamed face beamed.

"Hang it, son, you should let a man know you're coming."

He had a round-up voice which, even when lowered, would booger ladino cattle from hiding. And his eyes, mossy-gray agate like Rollie's, betrayed him now. In them was the same concern that clouded Sarah's hazel ones. She had not said she was glad to see Rollie, because she guessed, or knew, his purpose.

He wished Newt would not feign it. It was evasion.

"Dad, I'm here to inspect the records."

"Again? You read them brands your last trip."

Rollie nodded gravely. Newt's glance settled on him at last, with a sort of resignation. His fear confirmed, Rollie suddenly hated his job, the whole deal.

He said, "The chief has been receiving reports, Dad."

Newt waved a hand. "It's all right, son. No need to explain. I've heard the rumors here. Ain't saying they're true or false. I've seen lots of shaky ventures pulled through by faith alone. A bank's no different. Been rough going in these thickets for two or three years, but this one tops 'em all."

"It's state-wide, Dad; half a dozen banks have gone under. The office is desperate. We must check the spread, or we'll have a repetition of the wildcatter's bust of Seventy-three." He paused, and added, "This is my circuit, but they didn't have to send me. I asked for the assignment."

Newt's wide shoulders squared up. "Glad you did. If need be, you an' me can bust this critter, forefeet an' hind."

Remembering the comptroller's request for a twenty-four-hour report, Rollie wondered. He said, "You bet, Dad."

Newt got his Panama from a wall rack. "C'mon, we'll grab a bit of breakfast."

ROLLIE'S first hour on the books revealed that Newt had gotten the bank in deeper water—swimming water—since the last inspection a month ago. Then Rollie had counselled his father, aware it had little effect.

"Hang it, boy," Newt said. "I'm no big-stakes mogul, but I know this business ain't based on cows an' market quotations alone. It's the men who count—their character, their word. A fickle market can blow up like dynamite, an' drouths can last two or three years, but they don't change a fellow's integrity. Either he's a good risk or he ain't."

"True to an extent, Dad. He can also die, leaving you holding an empty bag. These personal demand notes, these short-termers you've repeatedly renewed, others with security only a third of their value—"

"What am I supposed to do? Close 'em out? I would lose then."

Rising from his rawhide-covered chair, he peered at the particular ledger entry Rollie was studying.

"Take that one. Buck Gentry. Range burned black. Has to hand-feed his stuff, or lose 'em. An eight dollar K.C. market! Go broke trailing, if there was any grass on the Chisholm, which there ain't. Sure, Buck's into me already, but maybe a few dollars more will see him through. Save both him an' me. Who can I get to endorse for him? Nobody whose paper I ain't got."

Tortured by his practical duty, knowing he could not give this a clean bill, Rollie stared out the open window. In the dry mesquite, katydids shrilled. On the street corner stood a knot of men, a nervous apprehension in the glances they cast toward the bank.

In her cage, Sarah had paused to watch them, her features strained.

He said, "Sentiment aside, Dad, you can't gamble with the town's trust. You're in serious straits. What if someone started a run?"

"A run?" Newt's tone was incredulous. "Not these folks. I know them; they know me. Confidence ain't like money—lost today, regained tomorrow. Once earned, it's steady."

"You can't conceive it, yet desperate people do desperate things."

Newt shook his head, a bit too emphatically, and Rollie returned to the records. There might be something he had overlooked, some last straw he could grasp before ruining his father, which meant Chaparral itself.

The fact remained that the blow would be dealt, if not by him, by his successor. He tried to reason it might be best for Newt, who was so much out of his element. Newt was a cowman, and belonged back on the Rafter B. Without his supervision it had gone downward, though it was still the soundest in this brasada country.

Rollie's honesty admitted that was where he longed to be. In a saddle, not poring over stacks of figures. This job, and his prior schooling, like his father's banker role, had been concessions to the woman now gone. Each of them had failed, and the bigger mistake would be in going on.

At noon Newt took over the cage during Sarah's lunch hour. As she put on her straw bonnet, she met Rollie's glance and smiled wanly. Her worried gravity hurt Rollie, and made him proud of her, too. She had been a sticker, an all-chore worker without whom this bank would not have run smoothly.

Through the window he saw Clay waiting for her. For brother and sister, they were little alike. Sarah seemed displeased, rather reluctant to go with Clay. Rollie watched them out of sight, then bent again to his fruitless task.

He looked up absently when a woman entered, recognizing her as Mrs. Purdy, a middle-aged widow who operated a pie shop. Her transaction at the grille would have passed unnoticed further, had not Newt attempted low talk. A whisper was not compatible with Newt. Rollie, listening, caught snatches of the conversation.

His father had asked with surprise: "Withdrawal in full, Miz Purdy?" and she said something about an urgent need. Newt almost betrayed himself by glancing toward Rollie, but checked himself. And after he paid off, and she left, he stood staring fixedly after her.

If he looked around, Rollie did not know it. For he had buried his nose and attention in the books, and he felt sick at his stomach.

HE NOTED Sarah's nervous manner when she returned. She was a direct person, but now he saw that she avoided Newt's gaze.

She said, "Clay asked me to give you a message, Mr. Bonner. From his boss. Barstow has some idle capital which he will loan you for this emergency."

After a stunned silence, Newt said sarcastically, "Such generosity!"

"No, Mr. Bonner. He stipulated a controlling interest in the bank, or Rafter B as collateral."

Newt's face turned a raw beef color. "The scavenger! He's been licking his chops through this bad spell. Cheating at the tannery, robbing on feed an' supplies. I've kept folks going, just out of his claw reach. He likes the drought, the dying cattle an' the starving ranchers. Well, this bank will close its doors first. Be less calamity for Chaparral."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Bonner. I promised Clay—"

"An' I think less of Clay for asking you to," said Newt. Calming down, he patted her shoulder. "Big brothers can also be big problems, Miss Sarah."

Her expression was pained, and she bit her lower lip. She nodded, her honey-hued hair catching sunbeams, then moved to the wicket and busied herself.

Newt paced the floor. Rollie stared dully out the window. He could see several clusters of townspeople now, all in solemn conversation. Newt, coming over, eyed the closed books before Rollie, and for a taut space afterwards they studied each other.

Rollie said, "You're insolvent, dad. I must report it. Tomorrow."

Despair sagged Newt's frame, lined his face. Rollie felt wrung dry, but there was sweat on his palms, around his mouth.

Newt said abruptly, "Tomorrow? Hang it, we ain't sunk yet."

Grinning craftily, he got his hat and strode out, heels thumping.

Rollie frowned and tried to muster a hope already worn threadbare. When he became conscious of Sarah's sympathetic regard, he went and stood beside her. She filled him with the usual yearning, yet he was at a loss for words. She, too, had her own problem.

He said, "Perhaps it's best. This bank is a mistake. Rafter B is his place, and

mine. I'm quitting. We'll shake the wrinkles out of the ranch and—" He paused, dropped his gaze. "It won't delay our plans too long, Sarah. I can't let him down."

After an interval, she said, "No more than I can let Clay down," and it was as if she had thrown a barrier between them.

Their last spat—and a few more before it—had been over Clay. Orphaned in their teens, she had done a good job as sister and mother to Clay, until recently. He needed a strong man's hand now.

"You act as if I hate Clay. I just said he'd better buckle down and quit gambling, sporting, stake racing. And he won't do it working for Barstow. He'll be tarred black as—"

"Rollie!" Her fingers dug into his arm, and he sensed her fear. "Please. I'm sorry I mentioned him. He—he's promised me to get another job."

"Sure, Sarah," he said, with contradictory thoughts. "He will."

In a miserable silence they stood there, quite close, quite far apart.

A man entered. He wore range garb, longhorn mustaches, and was about Newt's age. After bowing to Sarah, he pumped Rollie's hand. Glancing around, he asked, "Where's that scalawag pappy of yours?"

"In town somewhere, Goliad."

Goliad grunted, shifted weight, stared at a wall. His presence, although taciturn, relaxed Rollie a bit, for he was one of Newt's staunchest friends. They had served together in Gano's Texas Rangers during the late rebellion.

Finally Goliad spoke again. "Ain't got time to take root here. I'm riding out to Buck Gentry's. See Newt on my way back." Departing, he halted thoughtfully, and then came back. "Mebbe I don't want to see Newt nohow. The stubborn ol' coot. Always helping other folks, but refusing help himself, when he needs it."

He glanced uncomfortably at Sarah before going on. "Rollie, I know the bog Newt's in. I got some stashed dinero—not a lot, but he's welcome to it. Don't you forget it."

"I won't," said Rollie. "And thanks, Goliad."

GOLIAD had possibly a few hundred, Rollie reflected after he left, which would not be a drop in the bucket. One of the best drovers in Texas, Goliad was hard hit like the ranchers, but being a bachelor he had no family pressure.

It was the gesture that warmed Rollie. Goliad refused to entrust a bank, even Newt's, with a penny, yet would offer his last dollar on a friendship basis.

Converted Cowgal

By LIMERICK LUKE

A cowgal whose first name was Marylee
Resisted romance quite contrarily,
Till a cowboy who kissed her
Was such an insister
That she had to kiss back—necessarily!

Worried about Newt's absence, Rollie was watching the door when his father came along the sidewalk, looking weary and dejected.

Inside, Newt said, "Reckon I was wrong, son. I'm thrown, ready for the piggin' strings. I wired Ad Weaver in Fort Worth, an' Jobe Lumkin in Navasota—for a loan secured by Rafter B."

"The ranch? Don't sacrifice that, Dad! It has no connection with this failure. Bigger men than you would have gone down here. You're a cowman."

Newt smiled tolerantly. "Your mother told me something like that ten years ago. That I wasn't banker material. Son, a ranch, a bank, a herd—they're all part of this game. I've wrangled Chaparral through some tight squeezes." His smile fading, he shrugged. "The ranch is safe. Ad said he was pulling leather. Lumkin said it would be unethical."

Oddly, Rollie felt no relief. He was seeing this old rawhider against a new background. Newt would never enjoy Rafter B if his neighbors went under. He would always believe he had not done his utmost to avert their misfortune. His unselfish lot was tied in with their welfare.

Rollie said, "It was a mistake to wire, Dad. Now the town knows you're shaky. They were guessing before, waiting for my official action. I think it best to close up, prevent a run."

"There won't be no run. Nor any violence, such as you're thinking. That banker they roughed up in Marcos was a crook. I'm not. These folks know the time element is breaking us. They may have to wait, but they won't lose a nickel. Go ahead an' close the doors."

Rollie shook his head. "Business as usual, Dad, till tomorrow. Maybe—" He wheeled, got his hat, came back. Doubting his wisdom, he still knew he must do it. He asked, "You got Gray Mouse in town?"

"At the stable. Why—where you going?"

"If you're hell-bent to plaster the ranch, write me authority. I think I can negotiate a loan. Tarver Evans, over at Prairie Dog, is in good shape." He studied Newt, in reality seeing Evans, whose financial juggling had always puzzled him. "Hang it, Dad, you and he are two of a brush-busting kind."

Newt, digesting his surprise, seemed about to shout. Sarah, Rollie observed, had a peculiar look, both happy and sad.

As he went down the street, Rollie's misgivings flared anew. The town was too quiet, the augmented groups too tense. From his store window, out of the heat and sunglare, Barstow watched.

The stable was deserted. Rollie located Newt's gray half-Arab stud. While saddling it, he heard the voices up front. He recognized the liveryman's: "I'll risk Bonner. He's never failed us."

"You'll get caught! I'm not taking Barstow's word, nor Clay's. She admitted it, there in my café at noon. I asked her point-blank before them both. She hedged, said she wasn't the auditor. Clay laughed, said everybody knew it, and Barstow said not to embarrass her. She left without even finishing her meal."

"She didn't admit it."

"Didn't deny it! And how about them telegrams Newt sent?"

They entered the cubby office, and Rollie stood immobilized by bitter thoughts, his gaze vacant. Finally, drawing girth, dropping stirrup leather, he swung up and rode out. The moment he reached the street, he was jarred out of his daze.

From all directions, townspeople were trotting toward the bank. He heard the muttering of the crowd before the double doors. Passing Barstow's, he saw the merchant standing outside now, smugly watching. Stiff-legging his horse to a halt, he dismounted and went thrusting through the jostling press.

IN ODD CONTRAST, the throng inside was comparatively quiet. If Newt, standing in their midst, recognized their grim, unpredictable mood, his calm belied it. Rolile admired him, also wondering if he would now admit that desperate people could be set off in a mass reflex.

Newt was saying, ". . . want your sav-

ings, an' you'll get them. But not by any screw-tailed stampede like this."

Rollie kept shouldering toward his father's desk in the railed section.

Someone said, "How we gonna get it, Bonner? We know you ain't got it!"

"Don't fret, Deke. Your ten bucks are safe. Your boss, Barstow, wants to buy into the bank to keep it solvent." He paused, letting the dire implication penetrate the crowd. When their mumbling died, he said, "Which ain't necessary. I admit there's not much cash on hand, but I'm bringing more in tonight."

Marshal Dew said, "Rumor has it that when you close today, you won't re-open tomorrow. Folks think mebbe you better empty out that vault now."

The silence was vibrant, the scene static except for Rollie, moving nearer the desk. Reaching it, he eased open a drawer. Sarah, in the cashier's cage, followed his action as he snugged the sixgun inside his waistband. When their glances met, she seemed stunned by the impact of his.

Newt said, "Very well, Marshal. That makes sure the bank won't reopen." He went to the vault, swung it wide. Carrying two money sacks to the cage, he set them down. "Sorry there's not enough to go around—but first come, first served."

Rollie, removing another pair of bags from the vault, did not look up when Sarah joined him. She touched his arm. "Rollie, what's wrong?"

He said, "Your lunch with Barstow has given me indigestion."

The mob's reaction surprised him. They were milling about, still grim, but with a nervous indecision. One segment, target of a whispering harangue by Deke, broke and left him.

"Don't be bashful, friends," Newt said. "Get it while it lasts."

Rollie knew these people. They were innately charitable, helped one another. Newt was capitalizing on that. Nobody present wanted to shame himself by showing a personal greed at someone else's expense.

Newt had staved off the run, temporarily. In a changed, warm tone, he told them, "Calm down, neighbors. We ain't licked. My son is going after cash now. This bank will remain open until he returns. Then, if you want your deposits—"

Someone said:

"We'll see, Newt," and they began to disperse.

Rollie took the Colt from his belt. On second thought he thrust it back. He might need it later. He was conscious of Sarah's wan face and haunting expression as he left.

And as he rode out of town, the people again were in their random clusters, worried, watchful.

He ran the gray easy till it got its wind, then let it out. He had a forty-mile round trip to make, and he realized he was going not on hope, but on faith alone. . . .

Around midnight, less than eight hours later, he was breathing the stallion on a *falfurrias* a few miles outside Chaparral. His saddlebags bulged and clinked. This was the day of the gold eagle, paper currency being in disfavor, and Tarver Evans had scraped his coin bin to accommodate.

Evans, who read brands better than print, spoke cowpen Spanish better than English, and, like Newt, had faith in his land and people. Rollie was beginning to understand. They knew the drouth, the market collapse, the financial jitters, were transitory. A man's spirit and courage were not.

Their faith had beaten Barstow. He would not gain control of this range for a song, or wax fat on the misfortune of others.

Rollie rode on, suddenly tired. Coyotes sang around him, and the resin pungency of the brush was sharp in his nostrils. A scuttling jack rabbit startled him, and now, passing through mesquite and huisache, he felt the jimjams.

The shadow came at him from the thicket. It was a blur of horse and rider, black-inked against the blue background of night. Rollie tried to swing Gray Mouse, but the attacker was alongside him, closing in.

The gunbarrel blow along his temple unhorsed him.

ROLLIE lay with groggy senses, fingers wrapped around his Colt handle, lacking strength to free it. The man and the horses were in a confused blob above him, at last separating. That was when he managed to raise his revolver.

The shot seemed an eternity later, and he got in a second one, although unconscious of how he did it. The rider, yards away, became frantic, fighting his animal. He fired—once, twice, emptied his full cylinder. Then the brush swallowed him.

Rollie stumbled erect. Reeling to the stallion, he clutched the saddlehorn with one hand, his other exploring. The money was gone.

Now he stood, both hands gripping the nubbin, in the deepest pit of despair he had ever known. This finished Rafter B, the bank, and Chaparral. Only one person knew his mission; only Sarah could have betrayed him into this. For, despite his lack of identifiication, he was positive that robber was Clay.

Moreover, he knew when he rode into town, empty-handed, the lid would blow off. They would wreck that bank around Newt's ears. Unless—

The idea was absurd, yet he grasped it, shaped it in his mind. Anything was worth a try.

Goliad's darkened adobe hut was bushed deep in the pear, in the fashion of an old mossyhorn. He came to the door in a nightshirt, barefooted, peering sleepily at Rollie before inviting him in. He lit a lamp and listened to Rollie.

"Damn tootin', boy. Newt can have every peso I got!"

He stomped into boots, got a lantern and went out. Rollie watched him enter the pole corral and begin digging by a post.

After washing the dried blood from his scalp cut, Rollie gathered up spare newspapers and found some shears. He also had collected a miscellany of nuts, nails and washers by the time Goliad returned. Grinning, the drover plopped a stained, earth-caked *morral* on the plank table. When he tipped over the canvas bag, Rollie gasped at the contents which cascaded out.

Gold pieces, crumpled greenback, silver dollars. As Goliad spread the litter, Rollie estimated there was at least five or six thousand. . . .

Rollie heard the high, lilting fiddle strains before he reached town. It sounded like Buffalo Gals. He heard the singing and hand clapping when he rode into the main street. This lower end was dark, but yonder before the bank the kerosene lamps cast smoky light over a scene that slowed him from a trot to a nonplussed walk.

It was a square dance with, it appeared, all of Chaparral participating. They were executing a Texas Star as he drew rein at the crowd's edge. On the sidewalk, sawing away on strings, were the Bennett brothers, long rivals for champion fiddlers of this brush country. Rollie's jaw dropped when he saw who was calling: old Newt, in foot-tapping abandon.

When his presence caused a stoppage of sound and motion, he rode through the gathering to his father. This was the test, to act natural under the collective attention. He said, "Watch your tongue, Dad, or you'll step on it." His eyes were roving, searching. "Why the hoedown?"

Somebody shouted, "Where's the money, Rollie?"

Before he could answer, he caught sight of them—Clay and Sarah in the bank's doorway. Throttling his sudden, raw emotion, he jerked his head around. Dismounting, he held up the pair of scarred alforjas before draping them over a shoulder. "Here." He untied the bulky specie sack from the saddle, holding it up likewise. "And here."

Turning, he walked toward the door, intently studying Clay. Clay's set expression, almost a grimace of pain, though meant for a grin, gave him away. His agitated glance traveled over Rollie's frame. He's wondering, Rollie thought, why I'm not leaking, after his target practice.

Clay's eyes fastened on Goliad's saddlebags, as if he sensed their ownership but could not place it. When Rollie halted before him, his gaze went shaky, shuttling.

Rollie laughed, and for the benefit of the crowd, said loudly, "What's the matter, Clay? Doubt this is dinero?"

Clay didn't reply, whereupon Rollie thrust the sack at him, releasing it. Clay grabbed it, held it stupidly, staring at its stencil which read: The Drovers, Dodge City. Rollie saw his lips quiver. "Open it, Clay. Take a look; feel it."

Clay glanced at the murmuring, expectant throng, then opened it. His surprise was genuine as he scooped up a handful of coins, dribbling them back. Rollie reached in, flashed several packets of bills.

"Who claims we're busted?" he asked the crowd, and patted the forward alforja, which jingled dully. Taking the sack from Clay, he ignored Sarah and entered the bank.

Newt boomed, "Okay, neighbors. We got plenty for everybody now. Come an' get it."

NEWT JOINED ROLLIE inside the teller's cage. The latter, with saddlebags at his feet, was sorting the sack's contents on the ledge, covertly watching the people. Only a dozen had followed Newt in. The rest remained outside, peering through the doorway and windows.

Newt said, "All right, who's first?"

In an awkward, guilty silence, the dozen fidgeted, eyeing one another. Finally Marshal Dew said, "I reckon we were hasty, Newt. You've never let us down. We— Hell, let's get the dance goin' again. C'mon an' call, Newt."

Newt chuckled as they made their impatient exit. "I kinda softened 'em up with that shindig. Nothing like shakin' a leg to relieve your mind of troubles."

Rollie thought, people who can dance under the threat of diaster can't be conquered, either. Then he stiffened, for Sarah was hurrying toward him.

Newt, bending down, asked, "What did Evans let us borrow?" and lifted the saddlebags to the counter. Before Rollie could stop his action, he had emptied one—the one stuffed with newspaper cut bill-size. "What's this, son!"

Sarah, at the grille now, stared at it. And

[*Turn page*]

motherhood

or movies for marilyn?

Now that she's married at last, what lies ahead for Marilyn Monroe? Has the new status changed her and her outlook on life? Will she make a good wife for Joe Di Maggio? What are her plans for the future? Is it to be a career or children—or both?

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"PEEKING IN ON MARILYN"

IN THE BIG MAY ISSUE OF

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MAGAZINE

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Rollie, abruptly weary, said, "Go ahead, Sarah, and tell them. Blow it up in our faces."

She shook her head. "I know all about the robbery, Rollie. Will you come with me, please?"

He had mixed feelings as he walked beside her toward the dark end of town. When they turned onto the side street where her cottage was located, he saw the figure striding ahead of them. In the moonlight he recognized it as Clay.

She said, "He made a mistake, Rollie. I offer no excuses for him. He wants to return the money." When Rollie did not comment, she continued. "He has been almost crazy, fearing he killed you. Had that been true, he intended to use the money for an escape to Mexico."

Clay had entered the house. A light appeared in the parlor's bay window, where a shade was half-drawn.

They circled her pathetic flower bed in the sandy yard and came to the vine-shrouded veranda. Here, Rollie arrested her and bent slightly to look in the open window. Now he understood the screeching sound he had heard in the room.

Clay had dragged a heavy bookcase from a corner, was bringing forth from hiding the Evans saddlebags. Rollie relaxed. It was on the level. In the same moment he froze. A gross shape had appeared in the parlor door behind Clay. Barstow! Instinctively, Rollie knew that at last he had been forced from the background.

Barstow said, "I'll take those, Clay."

Clay whirled. His fair complexion had a chalky pallor as he shook his head. Rollie noted how he shifted the bags across his left forearm. His gun was worn under his left armpit, beneath his denim jumper.

He said, "I told you, Barstow, I'm through. You can only be a fool so long. I almost killed a man tonight. No fault of mine that I didn't, I was so rattled. It won't happen again, an' I don't mind taking my medicine for the stick-up. I deserve it."

"Now, now, Clay," Barstow said. "I savvy how you feel. It's natural. There won't be any more rough stuff. I know when I'm licked. Don't do something you'll be sorry for. We'll split that money, and forget the whole affair."

"I can't do that. I can't explain why, either. Just can't. Don't worry, Mr. Barstow, I'll take full blame for this tonight."

Barstow rolled his shoulders, studying Clay as he brought out a panatela, sticking it between his fat lips. "Clay, you're right. And I promise you this." He paused, canting his head. It occurred to Rollie that he was listening to the sounds of revelry uptown. "You keep me out of it, and I'll hire you a lawyer, the very best."

Clay seemed relieved. "Thanks. You better leave by the back door."

As Barstow nodded and turned away, Rollie belatedly was drawing the Colt from his waistband. He had been too absorbed with Clay's problem to notice Barstow.

Barstow, pivoting around, had a hide-out weapon in his pudgy fist. Its report preceded Rollie's by a shaved second, and Clay's came on the heels of both.

Rollie disgustedly knew he had missed, Barstow's movement being unexpectedly swift. But the merchant was down, like a 'dogged steer—and moaning loudly.

Rushing inside, Rollie gave Barstow a precautionary check, then joined Sarah beside her brother. Clay sat propped against the glass-shattered bookcase, where Barstow's shot had flung him. His shirt bore a crimson stain high in the right shoulder.

As Rollie examined the wound, Clay said, "I could've matched him, Rollie, but I ain't a killer. I was aiming high."

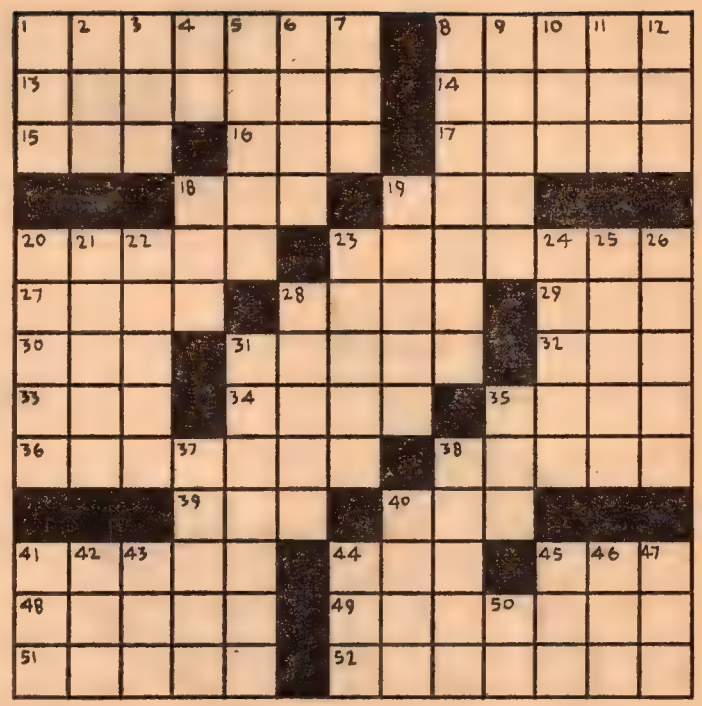
"That's where you got him, you dummy," said Bonner, sitting back on his haunches, smilingly at ease. "And knowing you, and these Chaparral folks, I'll wager Barstow is one accessory to a crime who will have the book thrown at him."

Sarah drew closer. "Is Clay hurt bad?"

"He'll live to be a hundred. You run and bring the marshal, and hurry." Abruptly he drew her closer.

"Hear that cowboy ragtime? The Bennetts are hot tonight, and I aim to get at least one dance with you, Sarah."

THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



The solution to this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

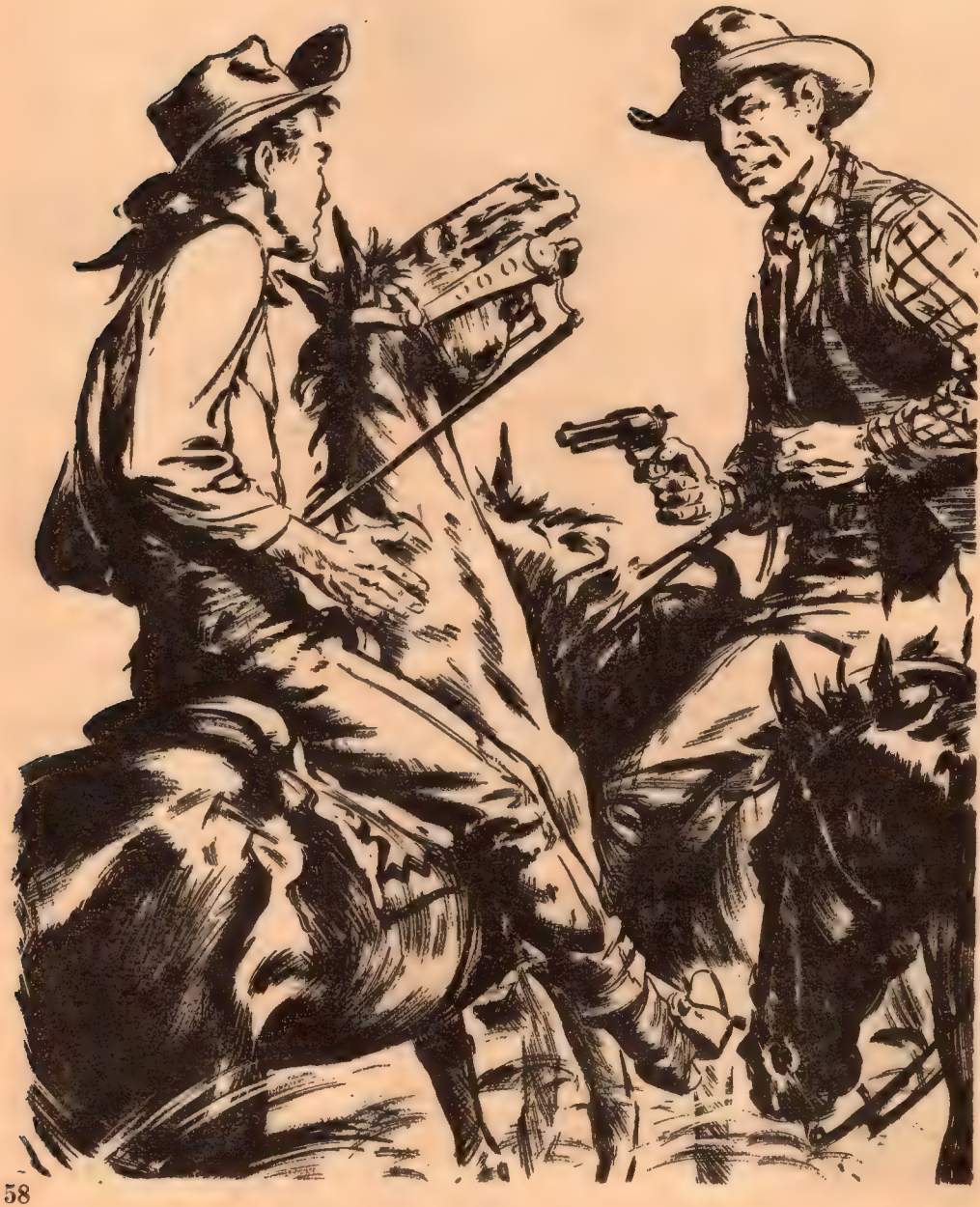
1 Saddle attachment
8 White mark on horse's face
13 The hero's lady
14 Lassoer
15 Yes
16 To excavate
17 Fall flower
18 Favorite
19 The lady
20 Protective covering
23 Companion
27 Uttered
28 Girl's name
29 Chewing substance
30 Tavern
31 Upsets
32 Fuss
33 To grow old
34 Head coverings
35 To eat sparingly
36 Western squatters
38 Parsonage
39 Beam of light
40 Hog thigh
41 Approximately
44 2000 pounds
45 Green vegetable
48 From the time of
49 To sell more than
51 Western beef animal
52 Western treeless tract

DOWN

1 Bashful
2 Golf mound
3 Man's name
4 Receiving Office (abbr.)
5 Horseman
6 Standard amount
7 Wooden pin
8 Hump-backed cattle
9 Not the winner
10 Likely
11 The letter Z
12 To make a mistake
18 Pea container
19 Classifies
20 Native of Asia
21 Cattle land
22 Coal pits
23 Young horses
24 Once more
25 Easterners out West
26 To act with emotion
28 Daily record
31 Playhouse
35 River barrier
37 Armistice
38 Horse blanket
40 Sixty minutes
41 Donkey
42 Morsel
43 Half of two
44 Spinning toy
45 By means of
46 Man's name
47 Malt beverage
50 Yes (Span.)

Solution to Puzzle in the Preceding Issue

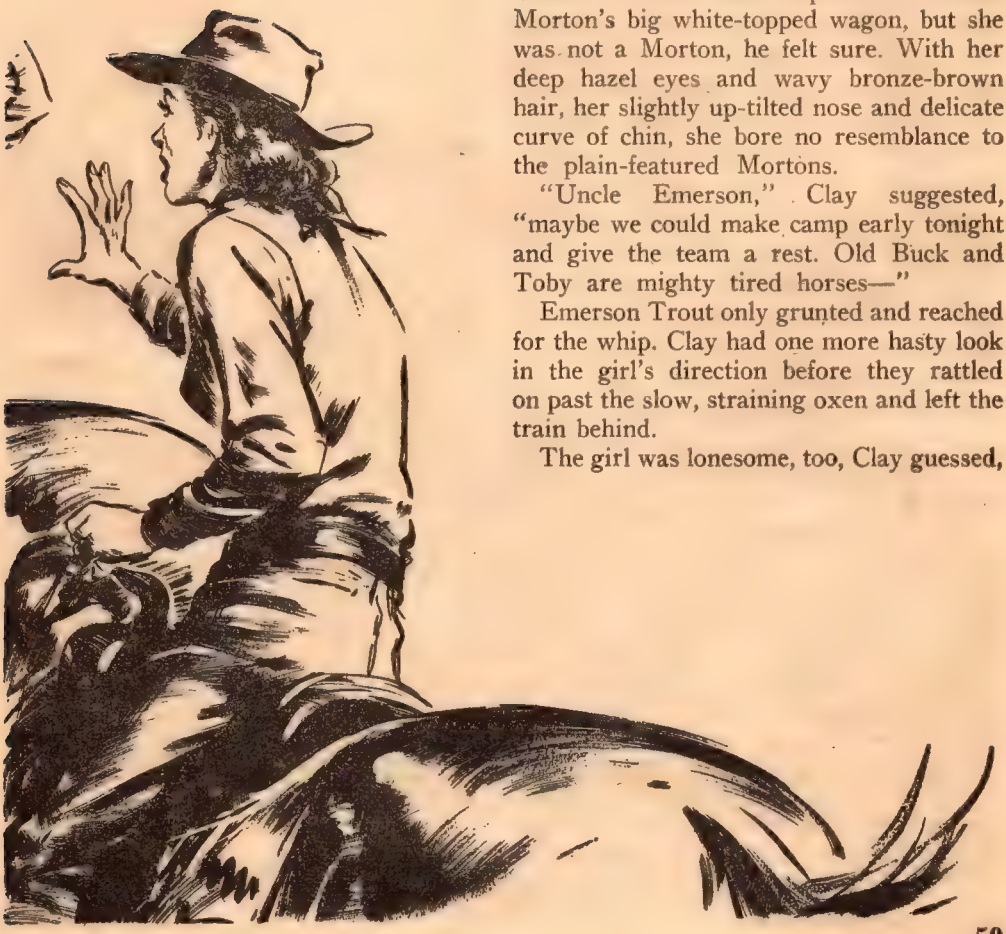
The Devil's



Highroad

by LLOYD KEVIN

CLAY LED the girl along a road of stalking terror—with nothing at its end but a gunman's bullet



CLAY MATHENY first saw the girl when he and his Uncle Emerson passed the wagon train along the Gila River. She shared Spence and Sarah Morton's big white-topped wagon, but she was not a Morton, he felt sure. With her deep hazel eyes and wavy bronze-brown hair, her slightly up-tilted nose and delicate curve of chin, she bore no resemblance to the plain-featured Mortons.

"Uncle Emerson," Clay suggested, "maybe we could make camp early tonight and give the team a rest. Old Buck and Toby are mighty tired horses—"

Emerson Trout only grunted and reached for the whip. Clay had one more hasty look in the girl's direction before they rattled on past the slow, straining oxen and left the train behind.

The girl was lonesome, too, Clay guessed,

with the same lost and hungry look in her eyes that he was afraid anybody could read in his own lean face. But in their rush toward California, he might never even learn her name.

Clay was thinking of the girl again in the camp outside Yuma as he rustled fuel and stirred a pot of beans over the fire, as he shook out blankets and cleaned the wagon and greased the wheels and curried the team. A scattering of white-tops had pulled into camp nearer the river. The Morton wagon might be among them. Maybe when Uncle Emerson returned from town, he could steal a few minutes away from his work and saunter over that way.

But the hours shaded into night, and Uncle Emerson didn't return. Clay's blue-gray eyes clouded as he sat down on the wagon tongue to finish his plate of beans. Every town and trading post they reached, it was the same—Uncle Emerson staying long hours in the company of traders and other travelers; then a late start and half-killing the horses to reach the next settlement.

Uncle Emerson Trout was probably gambling, wagering the precious tools and implements that had once filled the wagon. It was little wonder they could make good time now—the chests and boxes were well nigh empty.

Clay had dared only once to mention the loss. Emerson had replied with a growl: "We'll need cash money when we get to San Diego in California. Get to your chores, Clay, and leave business deals to me!"

So Clay had stuck to his chores. In all the thousands of rough and dusty miles he had seldom left the wagon. The only people he had seen were passing freighters or other emigrants in the slow trains they overtook.

He would have been better off, Clay had decided many times, if he had stayed on the little Ohio farm with his Uncle Eb. Being an orphan, he had lived first with one uncle and then with another, and Uncle Eb had been easiest to work for. Not that the work was light—it was dawn-to-dark hard labor—but Uncle Eb saw that tall, broad-shouldered young Clay had enough corn bread and pork to fill out his lean frame.

But Clay had been interested, as any young man would, when Uncle Emerson had come by the farm with his talk of California. Clay had asked for time to make up his mind. But Uncle Emerson was already moving fast, and it was Clay's turn, he pointed out, to work for him.

So for the past summer months, Clay had been working for his Uncle Emerson. The work had been harder than on the Ohio farm, and the meals scantier. He was seeing the West from the dusty track beside a sweating team, or from a muddy rut with his shoulder to the wheel. What a pioneer! He had chased off wolves, whistled at coyotes and dodged marauding redskins, and he didn't even own a gun. He was little better than a dry-land galley-slave!

Bitterly, Clay scraped up the last of his beans and polished the tin plate clean. He kicked out the embers of the fire, checked the picketed horses once more, and sat down on the wagon tongue to wait.

THE STARS were big and brilliant in the cloudless desert sky. From the direction of town came the harsh clamor of men's voices, boot heels on hard earth, the braying of a burro. From the wagon camp, a child cried, and then he heard the staccato plinking of a banjo, and two blended voices, a man's and a girl's, in a sad and plaintive song.

A lump grew in Clay's throat, and he jumped up to pace the dusty ground. It was early yet to turn in, but he forced himself to unroll his blankets. Despite the growing chill in the air at night, tomorrow would be another scorching hades under the sun, and he would need his strength. And besides, it was too much for one lonely man to bear, awake, the utter melancholy of this night. . . .

Clay was awakened from his bed in the wagon box by the sound of labored breathing, a hoarse groan and stumbling feet. He jumped up and pulled on his faded jeans. The sky was already growing light in the east, and he recognized Uncle Emerson's heavy-shouldered silhouette at the end of the wagon. But the older man was in trouble, falling, slipping to the ground.

Clay jumped down to kneel by his uncle's side. The man lay face down, and the haft of a long knife showed plainly protruding from his back, below the shoulderblade.

"Uncle Emerson—" Clay cried. He grasped the handle and tugged the knife out. But the labored breathing had stopped. Emerson Trout had finished his last journey.

Clay stared around him in the growing light with wild eyes, the knife gripped in his hand. Two men had come up quietly and now stood on either side of him. One was thin and dark-featured, with somber dark eyes. The other stool tall and broad and husky, with yellow hair and eyebrows and pale golden eyes.

"So you finally done it," the husky one said. "You knifed your partner—"

Clay jumped. "That's a lie! I never—He's my uncle—"

"We heard him cussin' you out," the thin one remarked, "back along the trail. Figured you'd get your dander up some time—"

Clay caught his breath and choked. Uncle Emerson *had* bawled him out, even cussed him some. "But I never got mad," he cried.

"Take it easy, boy!" the husky one cut in. "We caught you dead to rights. There's your uncle, dead—and you got the knife in your fist. We're both witnesses."

Clay sank down on his knees, staring at the bloody weapon he still held. Choking, he threw it from him.

"Don't get so riled up," the thin one cautioned, "just because we caught you red-handed. We ain't no sheriffs. We ain't duty-bound to arrest you, are we, Virge?" He winked at the larger man.

"Heck, no!" Virge replied. "We're you're friends. Let me introduce myself—I'm Virge Vaneck, and this here's Hub Price, my partner. We want to help you, boy. We'll even help you bury your uncle out in the desert, so nobody'll know."

Clay jumped up and backed against the wagon. A new tone in the men's reassuring words carried an even greater threat of danger. "I'll make out," he declared. "Much obliged—but I'll make out."

"Don't get so cocky," Hub Price complained. "We *want* to help you."

"You're Clay Matheny, ain't you?" Virge queried. At Clay's nod, his yellow eyes glittered. "I thought we had it straight. So let's deal 'em face up for a change, Clay. You ain't in no position to refuse our help. Think it over—you ain't in no position at all. So give us a hand and we'll load your uncle aboard before the daylight gets any brighter."

VIRGE and Hub caught the arms and shoulders, one on each side, and Clay, shuddering, lifted his uncle's feet, and they slid him into the wagon. Virge walked over then and picked up the knife. Wiping off the blood, he slid it into his own empty scabbard on his belt. "Get the horses hitched," he ordered Clay.

Far out among the cactus and creosote, Clay dug the grave, sweating under the blistering sun. He wrapped the body in blankets and canvas and lowered it into the the hole. Virge and Hub sat in the scant shade of a stunted bush and watched him until he had filled in the grave and leveled the sand.

"Well now, it looks like we got us a third partner," Hub remarked. "An honest-looking lad, with plenty of muscle."

"Yeah," Virge agreed. "And I've just been thinking how we can make plenty good use of him. Clay, how'd you like to hire yourself out as a guide to California?"

Clay shook his head emphatically and wiped his brow on his sleeve. "Without Uncle Emerson, I don't know the way."

"Honest, ain't he, Virge?" Hub said, chuckling. "You're forgetting, Clay, that we'll be around to help you!"

Clay turned his back on the men and threw his shovel into the wagon. Never had he felt so completely alone. And he had no money, nothing except the team and wagon and a few odd carpenter tools in one of the chests. He had gone through his uncle's pockets when the two men seemed not to be watching, but he had found nothing, not even his uncle's big gold watch. And the rifle that Emerson had taken into town with him, was gone.

Both Virge and Hub carried heavy percussion-cap revolvers, Clay noticed, besides handy knives at their belts. And Virge was talking to him again, explaining some kind of deal . . .

"You're heading for California, ain't you, Clay?" Virge queried. "So all you have to do is guide a certain party across the next stretch of desert and into the California mountains—"

Again Clay shook his head. "I hear they call it *Jornada del Muerte*—that California desert. I don't savvy Spanish, but I know it means Journey of Death."

"Yeah," Hub agreed. "And they call the trail the Devil's Highroad. But you got to cross it to get to San Diego."

Clay squinted up at the blaze of sun, not yet a third of the way into the sky and already hot as molten copper. He looked out over the shimmering heat on cactus and sand, and once again he slowly shook his head. "I don't reckon I'll go to San Diego."

Virge Vaneck strode across the rippled sand to face Clay. "You'll go," he stated. "There's a party in town that needs a guide, somebody to help find a nugget-rich gold mine in them California mountains. You hire out to help—"

"Why?" Clay countered. "Why not somebody who knows the way?"

Virge's lip curled, showing a row of strong yellow teeth. "Have I got to draw pictures for you? We want that mine. The old duffer that's got it don't need it half so bad as Hub and me—"

"Then why don't you hire out as a guide?"

Virge snorted, and Hub, who had finally left the shade, crowded up to Clay. "Maybe I can explain," Hub offered. "That party in town doesn't like us. Virge and me got kind of a bad reputation back along the trail, so we can't get the job. That's where you can help—with your honest face."

"But suppose I refuse—"

Virge reached for his knife, the same knife that had drawn Emerson Trout's blood, but Hub pushed him back. "You refuse," he pointed out, "and we'll see you hanged from an up-ended wagon tongue—"

"We're still witnesses against you," Virge added. "And we ain't seen a good hanging for two-three days now."

"You'll like the job," Hub declared. "That party we spoke of is a girl—a good-looking girl who came out this far along with Spence and Sarah Morton."

Clay gasped. They were talking about the girl he had seen in the wagon beside the Gila River, the one with the lonesome hazel eyes. His pulse hammered. If they meant to harm that girl . . .

"Sarah Morton kicked her out when they got to Yuma," Hub went on. "Claimed that Spence wasted too much time making eyes at her. So she's all alone."

"Her name's Cora Ann Kingsford," Virge explained. "And we saw the letter from her old dad, Grover Kingsford, telling her to come West and hunt him up. But we ain't seen the map to his mine. That'll be your job."

CLAY CLIMBED back onto the wagon seat and spoke to the team, heading around through the desert toward town. At last he knew the girl's name—Cora Ann Kingsford. He repeated it again to himself, like the words of a ballad. Cora Ann Kingsford—for her he would brave the *Jornado del Muerte*. If she was going to join her father in the mountains of California, he would risk his life to see that she reached her destination.

But the deal that Virge and Hub proposed, to go along and steal Grover Kingsford's gold mine—Clay shivered and set his jaw. Somehow he had to get rid of Virge and Hub.

They pulled up at the edge of town, and Clay studied the nearly empty wagon box. "I'll have to get supplies," he remarked, "as soon as I can earn some money—"

Virge laughed dryly. "We'll trade the wagon and team for pack mules and grub and maybe a horse apiece for you and the girl. Hub and me got our own broncs down at the livery stable."

"I can't trade off the wagon and team," Clay objected. "Old Buck and Toby have been—" But his words went unheeded. Virge was looking over the outfit with a

Clay fell back, the gunman lunging savagely at him

speculative eye, and it was becoming increasingly clear, when Virge made a decision, there was no alternative.

"You wait here," Virge ordered. "I'll go make a deal—"

A half-hour later he was back with instructions for Clay to deliver the outfit and pick up his pack and saddle animals. Wearily, Clay drove as Virge directed, and he met a bright-eyed little Yankee trader, looking odd with his desert-burned skin.

"That's a clean outfit you've traded off, lad," the man remarked. "Shows you're a good worker. If you've need of a job, I'll be glad to hire you. I can't get a decent day's work from anyone around here."

"I'm much obliged to you," Clay replied. "But I have to head on for California."

"Always the way," the trader declared. "The young are all moving West—"

Clay rode back to camp with two pack mules and two scrawny pinto horses with scuffed and weathered saddles. But he had an order on a local store for groceries and supplies.

Virge was waiting for him. "It's time to go meet the girl," he announced, "and make your deal." He pointed out the adobe building where she had found lodging. "And remember," he cautioned, "one foolish word out of you and we'll show the local lawman where you buried the body—"

Clay walked slowly down the narrow street of frame and adobe houses. Now that he was actually going to meet the girl, he felt a sudden shyness and a rush of vague doubts. Suppose she wouldn't even see him, suppose she had already met somebody else—he was presuming a lot on a single look from the girl's hazel eyes.

But at last he stood at the door and introduced himself, and Cora Ann Kingsford stepped out into the sunshine. She was ten times more beautiful than Clay had remembered, and his carefully planned words tangled on his tongue. She was wearing a soft, full-skirted dress of blue and white that dazzled his eyes in the blaze of sun. Her hair was combed in thick bronze curls and ringlets, like a deep-toned, glowing frame for the soft curves of her cheek and chin.

As Clay had remembered her, the girl on the wagon had her wavy hair pinned severely back and wore coarse gray homespun. Maybe Sarah Morton had insisted that she appear plain as possible, Clay guessed. She was far from plain now. Her radiant beauty took his breath, made him aware of his own tousled, dust-matted dark hair and the beginning of beard stubble on his lean jaw. He was ashamed of his faded and patched jeans and his wear-stained hickory shirt. Even his heavy boots were scuffed and run over at the heels. He must be a sorry sight in the girl's eyes.

But the lonesome look still showed in Cora Ann Kingsford's face, the same hunger for companionship and understanding that he had read back along the river trail, and he took courage.

"I'm headin' for San Diego, ma'am," he said, "and I heard you were looking for a guide."

THE QUICK RESPONSE in the girl's eyes, the sudden, growing hope, brought a twinge of conscience. Clay had to swallow a lump in his throat. If only his offer were honest, he thought, without the threat of Virge Vaneck and Hub Price in the background—but at least he was sincere. Maybe later he could tell her the truth and they could figure a way out.

"How soon would you be ready to go?" he asked.

The girl hesitated only a moment. "Tomorrow morning, I believe. Two men, Archie Jones and Cy Engle, who traveled for a while with our wagon train, are leaving early. I thought of going with them—but I was afraid, alone." Her eyes misted. "I'm so glad you're going with me. The trip should be safer for four people traveling together—"

Clay caught his breath. If two men she knew were heading west, she could go with them and dodge Virge and Hub. He opened his mouth to speak, to advise her to go on without him—but it would mean an explanation, telling why he couldn't join the party. Virge's warning rang in his ears. They had him cornered. They had only to speak up, and he'd be of no use to Cora Ann

Kingsford or anybody else. And they'd probably pick on some other unfortunate devil to take his place.

"Get your things together," he said gruffly, "and we'll make an early start."

They left camp in the middle of the night, as soon as the moon was high enough to light the river crossing. Archie Jones and Cy Engle supervised the arrangements, helping Clay cinch the heavy packs on the mules and sketching out the first day's trip in the sand. Both were slow-talking, unkempt, bearded men, used to taking the trail as it came.

Cora Ann Kingsford had packed away her blue and white dress. She wore jeans and coarse shirt and boots, and rode like a man. Clay's pulse throbbed anew as he watched her in the saddle, and his hopes sparked up. Riding together, they might easily escape Virge and Hub.

Those two had not been at the camp when Clay prepared to leave—they hadn't put in an appearance since Clay met Archie and Cy. All during the packing, Clay had been watching for them, shivers tightening his spine with the tension. But the four managed the river crossing and strung out into the moon-silvered night without a sign of either of them.

Clay felt his heart hammering, his breathing fast—if by some miracle of luck they had given the two men the slip, they were already free. The hazards of the coming trail were as nothing compared with the threat they were escaping.

But as the moon settled into the haze ahead of them and the sun flamed up, blood-red and scorching, two riders and a pack horse moved leisurely in from the left and joined the party. Virge and Hub had started on ahead out of Yuma and had been quietly waiting. Clay's spirits sank.

From the moment the two men joined the group, there was bickering and trouble. Archie and Cy had tangled with them before, Clay gathered, and wanted no more of their company.

Cora reined close alongside Clay. "Can't we get rid of those men?" she asked. "Even if we have to turn back until later. They rode with our wagon train for a while—until the captain ran them out for stealing."

Clay shook his head. "Later," he said softly, "I can tell you why they're here. There's nothing we can do now." He set his jaw and nudged his horse toward the shimmering western horizon.

SUN'S RAYS pushed down like actual fingers of flame, and the horses' hoofs sank deep in the sand. There was no grass, not a vestige of green. There was only the interminable gray and drab-brown of the desert. The party moved steadily on, silent, sweating, each struggling with his own bitter thoughts. They followed faint tracks through shifting dunes and they wound in and out through broken land that seemed to quiver and melt and disappear in the rippling heat waves.

The necessary stops were few. Rest for a horse meant scant rest for the rider, with often the only shade in sight the hot shadow of the animal's gaunt frame. Evening and the long, reddening sunrays on cactus and creosote and silver encelia found the horses plodding wearily, heads down. But still there was no stop for night—a camp required water, and there was no water.

Clay hunched in the saddle, his lean frame aching in every joint from the unaccustomed strain of riding. The wagon seat had been hard and the jolts rough, and hiking wore a man down—but no hard work of the past could match the saddle-soreness that now plagued him. In desperation, he swung stiffly down and walked for long stretches. The horse responded quickly as its load eased, but the greater exercise sapped more of the moisture from Clay's body and his tongue was thick in his mouth.

Clay shifted his pace to walk beside the girl's stirrup in the rising moonlight.

"Miss Kingsford," he said softly, carefully. "There's something I have to tell you the first chance we have—"

"Please call me Ann," the girl replied quickly. "Dad always calls me Cora, but I like the name Ann better. So to all my friends, I'm Ann Kingsford."

"I like the name Ann. And I hope I can be your friend."

"I think I know what's troubling you, Clay," Ann Kingsford cut in. "Those two men, Vaneck and Price, are holding some threat over you. I could see it in your eyes when they joined us this morning."

The party came to a halt then, bunched up in a narrow arroyo where a mule had loosened its pack. Clay had no opportunity to answer the girl. He could only nod and crowd past to lend a hand with the ropes.

At daybreak they found a well on the trail. It was a mere seepage of alkali-tainted water in a hollow in the sand, but by digging it out a few feet deeper, they could dip enough water for drinking and for the stock. It tasted brackish and left a man feeling thirstier than before, but it answered the need.

Here at last was a place to camp, with even a scattering of thin-foliaged bushes for a hint of shade. Ann took over the cooking chores at once, and spirits brightened at the end of a good meal.

But the calm was short-lived. Archie Jones and Cy Engle drew a rough map in the sand—and the next water hole lay a good fifty miles ahead. "We start at dusk," Archie declared.

"We're camping here till tomorrow daybreak," Virge Vaneck countered. "Horses have to have a rest—"

Tempers grew as the sun's heat broiled away the last breath of cooler air under the orchid-willows. By midafternoon Archie and Cy prepared to pull out on the blistering trail.

Clay edged closer to Ann Kingsford. "Better go with them," he whispered. "It's your last chance—"

The girl's eyes glistened moistly as she squinted into the glare. "Do you want to get rid of me? I've tried to do my part—"

Clay groaned. "Ann, it's not that—"

But Archie and Cy were riding out, fading quickly into the tremulous heat-haze of the desert. Virge Vaneck came to stand in front of Clay, grinning, his yellow teeth bared.

"Only four of us now," he said, "so take it easy."

THEY LEFT camp at dawn, riding into their shadows, with the growing sun pushing against their backs. The sand grew softer underfoot, the ground more open and desolate; and as the sun climbed the cloudless sky behind them, everything shimmered in the dancing heat-waves until even the trail became uncertain.

At noon, like a mirage on the sand, a lone, thin rider on a plodding burro materialized in the quivering air.

"It ain't real," Hub Price declared. "It's a heat ghost!"

"It's plenty real," Virge argued. "It's an Injun on a gray mule!"

"It can't be—ain't no bigger than a jackrabbit."

"I'll show you it's real—" Virge drew his big revolver and swung it up to take aim at the rider.

"Hey!" Clay yelled, riding at Virge. "You can't shoot down—"

"It's only an Injun!" Virge retorted. squeezing the trigger.

Clay struck the gunman's arm as the heavy revolver roared. The bullet missed the rider, but the little gray burro crumpled down to the sand in a lifeless heap. Virge cursed and swung the gun on Clay.

"I'll show you who's running this picnic!" The round black muzzle of the gun loomed big as a stovepipe in front of Clay's eyes.

But Hub Price pushed in and shoved the weapon aside. "Get a hold on yourself, Virge," he cautioned. "We can't do that yet—"

The Indian was only a boy, maybe ten or twelve. He wore only a tattered vest and a pair of jeans too large for him, cut off raggedly at the knees. There was no expression on his thin dark face as he stood looking at the dead burro.

Clay felt the lump rising in his throat as he walked over to the boy. "Where were you headin' for, lad?" he asked.

The boy looked up with opaque black eyes. "*No sé inglés.*"

A Spanish-speaking Indian—Clay shook his head. It would be hard to help the boy if he didn't understand him. But he couldn't leave the lad afoot in the desert. "Come—"

he said, motioning. "You ride behind my saddle."

The Indian understood and swung lightly up behind Clay. Virge scowled and patted his gun. He gritted, "You'll be blamed sorry for this trick, Clay!"

Ann rode close beside Clay as the party moved on. "Thank you, Clay," she whispered, "for saving the Indian boy. Those men are beasts!"

They were worse than that, he wanted to tell her. But Hub was crowding in, listening, so he nodded and pushed on. The heat was stifling again, like a choking blanket on head and shoulders.

By late afternoon all the moisture had been cooked out of man and animal, and tongues swelled in cottony mouths. There was always the stale, warm liquid in the canteens—but there was also the threat ahead of not finding water.

Clay tried to spit the gritty dust from his mouth, and he became aware of the Indian boy nudging him. "*Agua—*" the boy said. And he pointed off to the left beyond a ripple of white dunes.

Clay passed the message along—water ahead, off the trail.

"It's a lie!" Virge retorted. "No water for thirty miles."

"The Indian knows—" Clay insisted.

"Never trust an Injun!" Virge growled. "If there was water, the old-timers would have told us." He crowded his horse ahead.

But the animals, as if they sensed the argument, slowed to a snail-pace, and Virge gave in. "It's a waste of time and horse flesh," he gritted, "but we'll have a look."

A MILE off the dry and barren trail and the horses began to prick up their ears and whinny. They smelled water. They stepped up their pace to cover the low range of sand dunes, and there lay a tiny pond, sparkling like a sapphire in a jade-green setting of growing rushes. It took all the men's strength to hold the animals back until Ann could dip up fresh drinking water.

"Now do you trust the Indian?" Clay asked, facing Virge. "We couldn't have gone far without this water."

"The horses would've found it anyhow," Virge growled.

Clay winked at the Indian. "Thanks, boy," he said softly.

Ann came up with the canvas water bucket. "What's your name?" she asked the boy. "What do they call you?"

The boy looked blank. Ann smiled and pointed to herself. "Ann," she said. She pointed to Clay. "Clay."

A glint of understanding came into the boy's black eyes. "Juan," he said, tapping his own thin chest.

"We're glad you're with us, Juan!" Ann declared.

Clay built a fire, and Ann prepared the evening meal, while horses and mules filled up on the juicy water-rushes. The desert had begun to wear down the two gunmen also—the minute they had eaten they stretched out on their blankets in restless sleep.

The Indian boy drifted away into the darkness, and Clay and Ann were alone by the fire. Hurriedly, whispering, Clay told of the situation he had been forced into by the murder of his uncle.

"That's why I wanted you to go with Archie and Cy," he explained. "It was your chance to get away from these men."

Ann reached and touched Clay's hand. "I'd rather take my chances with you," she declared, "than alone with strangers. We'll find some way—"

"I wanted to tell you back in Yuma, but they would have sworn that I killed my uncle."

Ann's hazel eyes narrowed. "I'll bet one of them murdered your uncle, if he carried any money. They were always after somebody's gold." She drew a crumpled letter out of her shirt. "Here is the letter they saw when I let Spence Morton read it." She handed the paper to Clay.

It told of a mine in the mountains where thick strips of gold fairly oozed from the rock, veins as thick as a man's body.

"At last we'll have wealth enough," Grover Kingsford wrote, "to buy you all the nice clothes you've always wanted and a fine house and a carriage with white horses—"

The letter continued with instructions to come West with the Mortons who were leaving Indiana for San Diego. The map he had enclosed would give final details.

Clay handed back the letter, and Ann smiled apologetically.

"I never asked for fancy clothes and a fine home—that was Dad's idea. All I wanted was a home."

Clay glanced around at the sleeping figures. "The map," he whispered. "They said they hadn't seen the map."

Ann produced another square of paper and handed it to Clay.

"I hope you'll be able to understand it better than I can!"

Clay studied the drawing by the light of the fire. At first it was but a scrawl of meaningless marks, but as he turned it to line up with the remembered drawing Archie Jones had made in the sand at their first camp, the directions became clear. Clay drew a deep breath—they had many hard miles of desert yet to cross, and then a rugged climb into a range of mountains.

"It will take days to reach that canyon," he remarked, pointing to the chart. "And we'll have to—"

A shadow flickered across the sand, and Ann screamed. Hub Price's hand suddenly shot out of the darkness and grasped the map. Instinctively, Clay gripped the paper, and a small section of it tore off and remained between his thumb and finger.

Hurriedly he glanced at the scrap in his hand. It was only the last "X" that marked the mine and maybe a portion of the canyon. He couldn't tell how much would appear to be missing from the larger piece of map. He quickly crumpled the scrap of paper and dropped it into the live coals. It burst into flame and blackened to ashes.

VIRGE VANECK stepped up to throw more twigs on the fire, to light up the camp site. He faced Clay then, and the firelight danced in his tawny eyes. "Now," he gloated, "we have the map. We won't be needing to put up with your monkeyshines any longer—" He reached to the smooth wooden grip of his big gun.

Clay swallowed quickly. He had one last card. "You forget," he pointed out, "that you haven't got *all* the map. The chunk I tore off is burned. So until we reach the mine—"

Virge hesitated and glanced at Hub. The thin man nodded. "He's right, Virge. The crazy galoot tore the map in two and burned his part. This takes us only as far as the west slope of the valley."

Virge bared his teeth. "You win this time, Clay," he gritted. "But my turn will come—and I'll tear you apart with my bare hands!"

Clay caught his breath and let it out with quick sigh of relief. For the moment he and Ann were safe. They had to depend on him to find the last of the trail.

"Why don't you hunt your own gold mine?" he queried sharply, feeling new confidence.

"You've read the letter," Virge retorted. "Where would you go to find a mine as good as that one? And you don't need to get too cocky, mister—I reckon if we followed this chunk of map we'd come across some kind of a trail to the mine, and we wouldn't have any need for you."

The little party rode out of camp again at daybreak, with Juan behind Clay's saddle. Now that he had seen the map, Clay felt a slight easing of the tension. He knew the general location of the mine and could find it alone in time, he figured. But with the map in Virge's and Hub's hands and their greed driving them, they would take the responsibility of the trail. Clay and Ann had only to go along. And in spite of Virge's threat, they would do nothing to Clay yet. They would risk no chance of missing the prize now that they were getting close. He had only to go easy and keep his eyes open for some means to help Ann.

The opportunity came that night in the dry camp. They had crossed the main trail during the day, angling north, and Clay's hopes had fallen. But as he lay in his blankets and watched the moon rise, he heard the far-off jingling of a pack-mule bell and he knew they had not gone far beyond the traveled route.

Cautiously, Clay slid out of his blankets and peered into the shadowy southeast,

searching for the pack train that must be moving on the trail. At last he made out the dim line of dark figures. There were several riders and at least a dozen pack animals heading west. There was help—if he could reach it. There were enough men to handle Virge and Hub, and he was far enough away from Yuma so that Virge's old threat meant nothing. Nobody would take him back now on a trumped-up murder charge.

Clay pushed the blankets into a mound to appear that he still slept there. Carefully he inched away, crawling on hands and knees toward the open desert.

He covered fifty feet, and his heart thumped in his throat. So far there was no sound of pursuit, no indication that he had been seen.

Breathing carefully, he kept on, and his pulse beat in his ears like the war drums of a tribe of savages.

Seventy-five feet—a hundred feet— he

The little Indian rode a burro

stepped up his slow pace. The mule bell was loud now, moving steadily past. He'd have to hurry to catch the riders.

There was a sound behind him—a sharp, audible, metallic click. Clay swiveled around on his knees.

Hub Price was out of his blankets in the moonlight, and he held a leveled revolver in his fist.

CLAY caught his breath. Then he found his voice. "You shoot," he warned, the words sounding weak and hollow across the quiet space, "and you'll have that pack outfit over here to investigate."

Hub listened to the mule bell. Abruptly he slid the gun into his leather holster and whipped out his long knife. "I'll use this," he threatened. "On the girl—" He moved toward the spot where Ann Kingsford rested at a distance apart from the rest.

Clay's stomach knotted and chill sweat broke out on his brow. He jumped to his feet and ran back to the camp. Hub met him, knife held ready, grinning darkly in the moonlight.

"Any more foolishness out of you—" Hub threatened.

Clay shook his head and sat down on his blankets. . . .

The next day seemed hotter than any before, with a scorching wind shifting the fine sand in gritty waves against their faces. The horses, filled to bursting thirty-hours before with water-reeds and rushes, had gone soft as a result and had to be led, pushed, and even lifted through the soft spots.

Keeping off the main trail as they did, they missed a water hole, and both Virge's saddle horse and pack animal lay down in the sand to die. They loaded the pack on Hub's horse and both men walked. By night, they were all walking. By the next day, a pack mule had quit, and everything but food was left behind. Ann's blue and white dress, all her good clothes, were pressed in a heap under a granite boulder beside a spiny smoke-tree.

Juan, the Indian boy, was the only member of the party untroubled by the heat. The blistering sand seemed to have no effect on his bare, dark feet. He plodded quietly along, never far from Clay.

Day ran into night, and then into day again. They lost track of time. They found water, but only in meager quantity, and the horses and mules chewed dry weeds and chaparral.

They came in time to a low valley where the heat pressed down in suffocating waves

and the rank smell of salt-bush filled the air. Out of the shifting sand they came to a trembling quagmire and boiling volcanoes of sticky mud. They had to backtrack and circle farther to the south to find solid ground.

The Indian boy walked close at Clay's side and looked up at him with expressionless black eyes. "I show you good trail," he offered, speaking softly. "Plenty good water soon—"

Clay stared at the boy. "I thought you didn't speak English!"

Juan grinned. "No much *inglés*. Maybe none—when the two hombres come close."

Clay chuckled. The Indian boy was plenty clever, pretending no knowledge of English. He could listen and learn what they thought of him, just how he stood in the party, and nobody would question him if they didn't know his language. It was sign of true friendship that Juan had revealed his knowledge to Clay now.

"Thanks, Juan," he said. "Just point the way and we'll follow!"

They passed the mud-pots, and out of the haze ahead loomed purple hills, with higher mountains banked beyond. Clay felt the tension building up in him again. The mud-volcanoes were shown on the map The distance to the mine was growing short.

Ann, too, must have felt the strain. As they climbed wearily up the purple-gray west slope of the valley, she drew nearer to Clay, leaving the two gunmen out of hearing range.

"I'm carrying a pistol," she whispered cautiously. "Dad gave it to me when I was a youngster and taught me to load and shoot it. You'd better take it now, Clay."

Clay shook his head. "Keep it always ready, Ann. You don't know how relieved I am to know that you have it!"

"What will happen when we reach the mine?"

Clay frowned in thought. "I don't know. But it won't be good. If we had any idea how many men your dad has—"

"They'll try to kill us all—you and me and Dad, won't they?"

"I'm afraid that's the picture."

"Unless we can get away to warn Dad. Clay, I saw what happened the other night when you tried to go for help. I'll always be grateful to you."

Ann's horse stumbled, and then Virge and Hub were close and there was no more opportunity to talk.

THEY CAMPED that night in a little canyon at the edge of the mountains. There was a spring and a trickle of stream seeping away into the sand, and there were whispering palm trees around the spring, green and cool against a background of gray-black rock. To Clay's desert-weary eyes, it was the most beautiful haven he had ever seen.

But death hung over it. During the afternoon they had crossed a plain trail running north and south, and now they were already at the mountains, already beyond the last margin of the map Virge carried. Only the exhaustion from days and nights of hard travel kept Virge and Hub silent now, Clay knew. Bone-weariness had driven them to bed down in warm sand at dusk, but with the morning they would be after him, driving him to lead the rest of the way to the mine—or to die with a bullet in him.

Clay watched the wild palms swaying in the breeze, and his own exhaustion dragged at his eyelids. But he dared not yield to sleep. So long as he had strength to crawl, he must try to get Ann away from this camp. It was their last chance.

Clay dragged himself out of his grass bed and threw a twig on the coals of the fire. Virge moved restlessly and Hub sat up. But as Clay returned to his improvised nest, the gunmen relaxed.

An hour later, Clay repeated the performance. This time Virge never stirred, and Hub only lifted to one elbow for a moment. Another hour, and neither man moved as Clay snapped twigs and piled them by the cooking stones. The coals had faded to ashes, and he was careful not to stir them to life, not to drop a stick where it would actually burn.

Instead, he moved as quietly as a shadow to where Ann had made a pile of ferns and brush to ward off the night chill.

"Ann!" he whispered.

"Here I am!" Ann whispered back. "Ready to go—"

Clay caught the girl's hand and gripped it tightly in the deep darkness of the canyon. He whispered, "If we can ever get out of here—"

A shadow moved against the rocks, and they both stiffened. It was thin, dark, barefoot little Juan.

"You follow," the Indian boy suggested.

Juan dropped to hands and knees and wriggled silently past the cooking stones and along the canyon wall past the two sleeping men. Heart pounding in his throat, Clay motioned Ann ahead of him along the same narrow path, and he followed close behind. A single misstep now, he knew, would finish them all.

But no stone turned under their touch and no dry twigs snapped to give them away. The moon inching slowly into sight found them well out of the canyon and moving along the open slope.

They crossed a wide dry-wash of coarse sand, still keeping low, still crawling. Juan was beside them now—there was no trail here. Suddenly the boy stopped short, pointing ahead.

Clay looked and quickly threw his arm around Ann and touched his fingers to her lips to stifle a cry. Only a few feet ahead a thick-bodied sidewinder looped across the sand in his own peculiar, angling motion of travel, his rattles shining in the pale moonlight. Clay felt Ann shudder as she saw the reptile, but the girl made no sound.

When the snake had gone, they moved ahead, and Clay was surprised to find his own shirt sticking to his skin with cold sweat.

They had fifty yards more of open sand to cover, and then thick brush to hide them. Clay's pulse pounded until it choked off his breath and the taste of fear was in his mouth as they crawled the last few yards in growing moonlight.

But no sound came from the camp, no blasting shot to stop them in their tracks. Even the horses were too worn down to whinny or even to snort in fear at the forms crawling past them. At last they moved into the brush and could dare to stand—and only the Indian boy had the strength in his legs to travel on until they had rested.

The rest was brief—there was no time to lose. Shivering in the night chill, they pushed through the chaparral. It was not easy going. Tiny thorns on even the smoothest-looking brush caught at clothes and tore the skin. Precious minutes were lost time after time in backtracking to find an opening.

The moon stood high above them and the east had begun to pale with the dawn when they came upon a faint trail leading up into a steep, narrow canyon.

CLAY'S HEART pounded with hope. This could be the way to the mine. As nearly as he could remember, it would fit the right position on the map. They would have to try it.

But the trail was steep and rough, and Ann was near exhaustion.

"You stay here, Ann," Clay suggested. "Let us go on ahead for a look around. If I'm wrong, you won't have had the climb for nothing—"

Ann tried to object, but weariness overcame her and she dropped to the sand to wait. Clay and Juan tackled the steep path that climbed up over the rough boulders like a giant's stair. Halfway to the top of the first ridge they had to rest, and Clay tasted blood from the exertion. But foot by foot, they kept doggedly on.

At the top of the ridge, Clay forgot his weariness. Ahead in the early glow of dawn stood the mountain peaks he remembered vividly from the chart. The mine would be only a quarter of a mile away.

They were hurrying back down the hill to break the good news to Ann, when a shot rang out. It echoed flatly across the desert below. Clay's heart stood still and he half fell the rest of the distance. He found Ann with the little pistol clutched in her hand, and smoke trickled from the short barrel.

"Oh, Clay!" Ann cried, rushing up to him. "It was a big gray animal—a wolf or something, with glowing red eyes—and it came so close—"

Clay looked around into the brush, but

the animal had gone. Juan was nodding his head.

"Sometimes wolf here. Sometimes much curious, come close—"

Clay took Ann into his arms to quiet her trembling. "You scared the thing off," he assured her. "And it won't matter if they heard the shot back at camp—we're on the trail to the mine. It's right up there in the canyon!"

Ann clung to Clay and looked up into his face, her hazel eyes shining, her soft lips smiling, and Clay knew that the wild beating of his heart was not from the hurried climb alone. He held the girl he loved, the one girl he knew was meant for him from the first time he saw her.

Tenderly, he bent his head and found her lips. And Ann returned his kiss with eagerness.

But Juan was tugging at his sleeve. "Hombres come soon." the Indian boy warned. "We go—"

Together they hurried up the steep trail. It led along a high, narrow ledge above shadow-darkened depths of canyon and finally up over mere notches of steps cut in the face of an overhanging rimrock. In the cross-canyon above, just as the first rays of sun streaked across the desert, they found the mine.

Clay froze in his tracks as a chill of fear gripped him—there was no sign of life around the mine, no life anywhere in the whole canyon. It was a ghost-camp, still as death.

Juan ducked into the mine tunnel. He came out and spread his hands. *"Nada,"* he said. "There is nothing."

"We must have the wrong place," Ann cried. "It can't be—"

Hurriedly they explored the camp. It was long deserted. In a shallow ravine Ann picked up a tattered felt hat and studied the band. "It's Dad's," she cried, choking back a sob. "Something has happened to him!"

Juan came bounding up across the rimrock. *"Diablos!"* he yelled: *"Los hombres—"*

A heavy shot rang out, and the boy pitched headlong into the ravine.

ANN PRESSED her pistol into Clay's hand, and he jumped up to meet the gunmen. It was Hub, and he fired at Clay as he ran. The bullet whistled past Clay's head. Clay took aim then and fired the pistol. He saw Hub buckle in the middle, fall, and roll limply back down the trail into the canyon.

Clay handed the pistol back to Ann to load and started to look for the Indian boy. But Virge was up on the rimrock now and coming at them. Clay heard his yell of rage and whirled to face the gunman just as Virge fired his big revolver. The bullet slashed across Clay's right shoulder, and his right arm went numb with the shock.

Staggering to catch his balance, Clay dove at the big outlaw. Virge had his gun leveled again, aiming for Clay's heart, and he squeezed the trigger. But Ann had been frantically reloading the little pistol. She took hasty aim and fired a split second ahead of Virge. The smaller bullet tore into Virge's gun-arm and jarred the weapon aside, and the gunman's bullet only ripped Clay's shirt and burned his skin as it passed.

Clay struck the man then, throwing all his weight into his left fist. Virge dropped the gun from numbing fingers and reeled back. With a wild bellow, he dragged out his knife with his good left hand and came at Clay, head down and yellow teeth bared.

Clay caught the man's wrist in his own left hand, and they teetered back and forth on the bare shelf of the rimrock, each man with a crippled right arm, each fighting for life, and Virge had the greater weight and the only weapon.

"I'll carve your heart out," Virge roared, "with the same knife I used on your locoed uncle—" He twisted Clay's arm down closer to his face until the knife point glittered in the rising sun only inches from Clay's eyes.

At the edge of the ravine, Ann cocked the pistol and tried to aim, but chill fear stayed her hand. The slightest mistake, and she could hit Clay instead of the outlaw.

Clay backed away from the knife, twist-

ing. As Virge's weight bore down on him, Clay's heels caught in a crack in the rock and he went over backward, falling hard. But he kept his grip on Virge's wrist and carried the gunman down with him. Clay felt the jolting pain and shock as his back and shoulders struck the hard, flat surface of the rimrock, but his head snapped back in empty air.

For an instant Clay's blood froze. He was balanced on the edge of space, he realized, on the edge of eternity. Up past Virge's husky form, as the gunman came down upon him, he could see the clear blue of the sky turning gold with the dawn. Underneath his shoulders lay the hard, unyielding rock, but behind his head was only a hundred feet of blue-shadowed emptiness and far below, rough, jagged boulders.

With an effort born of desperation rather than reason, Clay jerked up his knees before Virge's heavy body could crush down against him. Risking his own precarious balance on the sloping edge, Clay straighted his legs and pitched the gunman up and back over his head, holding to the wrist until the last second.

The weight of the man and the momentum dragged Clay's shoulders off the edge, and he let go Virge's wrist to claw at the rock until his nails snapped. But the sky before his staring eyes shone clear and open, and from the vast well of emptiness behind and below him came a wailing death cry of the falling outlaw that sent a shudder through Clay's straining back. The man had at last paid for killing Emerson Trout.

CLAY CLUNG to the rock, his weight sagging slowly, steadily further over the edge—until Ann caught his outstretched foot, and inch by inch, with Clay's help, dragged him up to safe ground.

The shoulder wound was not deep, but it bled profusely. Ann tore up half of Clay's already ripped shirt to bind the cut. Anxiously then, they searched the ravine and found Juan's crumpled body. Hub's heavy bullet had passed through the flesh of his leg above the knee but hadn't broken the bone. The boy was unconscious from shock and loss of blood. With the rest of Clay's shirt, they bound up the leg.

"We can't stay here," Clay declared. "We'll have to get back to the trail."

"But what about Dad?" Ann cried. "How will we ever know what happened?"

Clay shook his head. "I'm sorry, Ann—we may never know. We can only hope—" He caught her hands in his. "From here on, Ann, I'll look after you."

"Oh, Clay, you've already done so much for me!"

"I love you, Ann. Will you marry me as soon as we can get to civilization? I don't know what kind of work I'll find to do, or just where we'll live, but I'll try all my life to make you happy."

Ann threw her arms around Clay's neck. "Clay, you've already made me happier than I ever dreamed I could be. From the moment I first saw you riding in that wagon with your uncle, way back along the Gila River, I hoped that some day—"

Juan stirred and moaned and Clay let Ann out of his arms to check on the boy.

"We've got to get him out of here," Clay declared. "Maybe we can find a doctor—" He gathered the boy up with his good left arm and helped to balance him with his still-numb right one as he started down the treacherous steps of the trail.

Ann hesitated only a moment for a last look at the mine and the littered hollow of the canyon. "I never thought when Dad came West to find a fortune that it would end this way. For a while he *had* a fortune—we know from his letter. But now—not even a trace."

Perhaps there had been other men like Virge and Hub, Clay thought. There were too many such men in the world and too little law and order in the new West. But he kept silent. There was so little he could say to comfort the girl. He could only grip her hand more firmly as she helped him down over the steep cliff with his burden.

At the mouth of the canyon they found Ann's and Clay's saddle horses, and one tired pack mule with the last of the supplies.

From the tall brush of the canyon floor Clay cut poles and made a crude litter to rope beside his saddle and carry the Indian

boy. Walking and leading his horse, he started down the trail into the valley, and Ann rode behind, bringing along the mule.

If he could get back to Yuma, Clay reasoned, there was the job the Yankee trader had offered him—much as he never wanted to see the town again. Or they might find some way to reach San Diego.

THE SLOW PROCESSION of whitetops filed down the west side of the valley for a long time before Clay dared to speak to Ann. It had to be a mirage, pure imagination.

But Ann was watching the wagons, too. "They must be real," she declared. "You remember, there were wagon tracks in that trail we crossed yesterday."

Soon they could hear the shouts of the drivers, the creaking of wheel hubs. Clay hurried his steps under the blazing sun.

The captain of the wagon train was a big man with a full beard. "Amos Adams," he introduced himself. "Bound for San Diego. Came by way of the new north trail, and I reckon we're about the first big outfit over this road. If you're going our way, we'd be glad to have you—" He looked at the still unconscious Juan and raised his eyebrows. "Injun?"

"He saved our lives," Clay said.

"We'll have Doc Hardy look at his leg and get him in a wagon. Frank Davidson's boy, Glenn, got himself horse-kicked yesterday and he's having a tough time with his team. If you want to drive four horses, Clay, you can take over Glenn's wagon, and there'll be room for the three of you."

An hour later, Clay and Ann sat on the high seat of the wagon, while Juan lay on a thick pad of blankets behind them.

"We may get to civilization sooner than we figured," Clay remarked, testing the movement of his right arm under Doc Hardy's new tight bandage. "I only hope I can find a job to support you—"

Ann gripped Clay's hand. "As long as we stick together, Clay, we'll always get along. I'm living for the moment I change my name from Cora Ann Kingsford to Mrs. Clay Matheny—"

"Madre mio!" Juan exclaimed.

Both Clay and Ann spun around, surprised. It was the first time they knew the Indian boy was awake.

"You—" Juan asked, pointing at Ann. "You Cora Kingsford? You—Ann?"

"My name is Cora Ann Kingsford."

"Your *padre*—Grover Kingsford?"

"Yes, Juan! Do you know my father?"

"Si—Grover Kingsford give my brother letter to take to Miss Cora Kingsford—maybe Yuma town. *Bandidos* kill my brother on south trail, but me get away. Come back and find letter in brother's hat. But can't go to Yuma; hombre shoot burro—" Juan dug in the pocket of his tattered jeans and brought out a crumpled paper.

Ann read hurriedly, and there were tears in her eyes when she handed it to Clay, tears of happiness.

Clay scanned the smudged writing. "The mine ran out sooner than we expected," he read. "But I dug enough gold to buy up a rich mercantile business here in San Diego. So come straight here. I can't wait to see you. Business is great, and you'll still have your fine home—"

Clay handed the letter back and stared into the dust of the wagon ahead.

"Isn't it wonderful!" Ann cried. "Dad is alive and doing well and we'll have a home in San Diego and no more worries—"

But Clay was still staring ahead, his jaw set. "It's no use, Ann," he said finally. "With your father and all that money, you won't need me. I'll be heading back to Yuma—"

"Clay!" Ann cried out. "I love you, Clay. For always! There'll be no fine home or anything else in San Diego or any place without you!"

She threw her arms around his neck and pulled him down to her, and Clay forgot the four horses he was driving as he took her in his arms and kissed her willing lips.

Behind them, Juan lay back on his blankets, grinning. Maybe, he thought, knowing Clay and Ann as he did, there might be room in that fine home in San Diego for him, too.

They weren't weak, O'Rourke realized

ONE MAN'S LAW

By W. D. Cotton

THEM'S good meat cows," Thompson said.

O'Rourke, sitting erect on a chestnut roan, shot a quick glance at his foreman.

"Tolerable," he said.

Thompson shifted uneasily in his saddle. O'Rourke turned his attention back to the riders swerving among the huddled cattle, cutting out stock that would be driven to the railhead for shipment. His gray eyes took in every movement, although his weather-scarred face showed no expression.

Once, O'Rourke thought, he would have experienced a feeling of excitement as he estimated the price his sleek cattle would bring on the market. That was before his success was assured, before his ranch had become the richest in the area, a smooth-

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IT TOOK A HOLOCAUST, almost fatal to himself, to prove to O'Rourke that times were definitely changing

running machine that turned out so many head each season with factory-like precision. In those early days, each small achievement was something to be proud of—a force driving him on. He still worked harder than any of his hands, but it was different now. A routine, almost.

One of the young hands, Dan Lavery, was riding into the herd too recklessly. The cattle, frightened, began to scatter, and he missed the cow he intended to cut out. O'Rourke turned to his foreman.

"Send Dan over to me," he said. "And you better help the boys. I can watch by myself."

Thompson rode off towards the circle of punchers and in a few moments Dan Lavery came up to O'Rourke. He was young—nineteen or twenty—slim, with wide shoulders and capable hands.

"You want to see me, Mr. O'Rourke?" he asked easily.

O'Rourke looked into his tanned, good-natured face.

"You gettin' your pay all right, Lavery?"

"Sure, Mr. O'Rourke." He looked at the rancher with a frown.

"Just wondering. It looks like you was riding for the fun of it, like you was in a rodeo or something. You're getting paid for the work you do, not fancy saddle work."

"I didn't think . . ." Dan began. He stopped as he looked into his employer's cool gray eyes.

"You ain't paid to think, Lavery."

The frown on Dan's forehead deepened. "Sure, I guess I see what you mean." There was an edge of contempt to his words.

"That's all," O'Rourke told him.

He watched Dan as he returned to the other punchers. The squareness had left his shoulders and he was slouching in his seat. He was young, O'Rourke thought, still a kid. He'd learn in time that life was more than riding for the kicks. That's how O'Rourke had built up his ranch, made himself secure and wealthy—by realizing that to get anywhere takes plenty of sweat and there isn't any time for horsing around. That's why so few ever did get anywhere; they weren't willing to work for it. He knew that among themselves the men called him Old Guts. Well, he wasn't old—fifty wasn't old—but about the guts he guessed they were right.

Word must have spread that O'Rourke wasn't taking any fooling around, because the hands rode hard and in another hour the work was finished. Thompson caught up with O'Rourke as he was loping towards the ranch house.

"I got word the nester down by the water hole is putting up a fence," Thompson said. "Thought you'd want to know."

O'Rourke reined in his roan. "I figured there'd be trouble, soon as he moved in," he said. "The fence comes down right away, Thompson. That water is in my territory."

Thompson held his reins limply in his hands. "Seems Peterson, or whatever his name be, has filed a claim, legal-like, for that land," he told O'Rourke slowly. "He and his daughter were in the land office about a week ago seeing to it. So I reckon they got a right to that fence if they want it, but I thought you ought to know."

O'Rourke's jaw was set tight. "I'm telling you that fence comes down," he said again. "Nesters are moving in all around, but I've worked too hard to let them edge in on me. Everyone knows according to custom a man has a right to fifteen miles around his property for his cows. I don't like being crowded and I need that water."

"Times are changing."

"Not that way." O'Rourke's voice was as hard as his gray eyes. "There ain't going to be any legal right hereabouts aside from what I say. You see that fence is cut before night. If that nester and his girl don't like it, they kin git out."

HE RODE BACK to the ranch alone, feeling a sickness in the pit of his stomach. He wondered why things were different now. He was still proud of his holdings in a way, proud of his position in the area, but he had no peace or satisfaction. Perhaps he was really sick, and that feeling in his stomach indicated trouble ahead. He could see Doc Lawson.

He may have been driving himself too hard.

But he shoved the thoughts back, knowing that no one drives himself too hard.

He ate the food his Chinese cook, Wong Sing, set before him without appetite and then settled down with his accounts. He could hear from the bunkhouse the faint sound of a banjo and men singing. He could never find time for idleness himself, there were always figures to be checked or a myriad of details to attend to. Thompson wasn't a bad foreman, but he was too easy-going. Unless O'Rourke kept tabs on all the operations of the ranch, the efficiency he had worked so hard to promote would begin slipping.

Footfalls on the porch outside took his attention away from the columns of figures. Thompson came in, followed by Dan Lavery, and a man of about forty in faded overalls and a girl about Dan's age.

"Sorry to disturb you," Thompson said, moving over to where O'Rourke sat. "It's about the fence. I sent Dan to cut it, but he came back with Peterson and his daughter. Dan says he ain't cutting the fence for me or you or anyone."

O'Rourke slammed his account book shut and looked at Dan. He read the message in the young puncher's blue eyes and the grimness at the corners of his mouth. Then O'Rourke glanced beyond at the man with his lined face and the girl who stood quietly at his side. O'Rourke thought he would like these people if they weren't getting in his way, threatening his authority. There was a serious dignity about them that won his grudging respect. But that didn't matter. He turned his attention to Dan. "Is what Thompson says right?"

The young puncher nodded.

"It won't take you long to pack your kit. Thompson will see that you're paid off."

Dan took a step forward. "I don't want your money," he said firmly. "I just want to get the dust of your spread off my boots fast."

O'Rourke knew it was a mistake, but he found himself asking: "Why?"

"I reckon you know well enough."

O'Rourke felt uneasy under Dan's steady calm. "You know as well as me them nesters have no right—" O'Rourke began.

"It ain't just about them," Dan cut in. "I don't aim to waste my time working for someone whose heart is all dried up."

The nester, Peterson, stepped forward and laid a hand on Dan's shoulder.

"Let me say something, lad," he said, speaking in a deep voice that seemed to fill the room. "I'm mighty sorry about the fence, O'Rourke, but I've staked everything I ever had in that little place of mine, and the only way I can make it go is to protect it from your cattle. Without that fence they'd trample everything down."

"You don't seem to realize I was in these parts first, and I need that water," O'Rourke said.

"There's no reason we can't work together. I need water and so do you. No reason you can't use that hole too. Only I got to keep your cattle from roaming across my place."

O'ROURKE felt sorry for the man. He knew what it was like to risk all you had for a place of your own, and how it was necessary to protect it. But he couldn't give in to this nester—not and keep his own position secure. Other nesters would crowd in and his grazing lands would be cut up and all he had labored for would be gone. You have to be tough, not only to get what you want, but to hold it.

He said, his voice growing harsh:

"I got my rights to think of. I don't want you settling there, fence or no fence, and the sooner you realize it the better. There's other places you can go."

"Sounds easy, doesn't it?" the nester said. "But all I've got in the world is tied up in my place. I mean to stay there."

A sudden anger flared through O'Rourke. First that kid Dan ignoring his orders, and now this man and his daughter coming to beg for mercy. He brought his fist down on the table, feeling the blood mounting to his cheeks.

"Get out!" he shouted. "All of you! There ain't no room for you and me in these parts and I'm damn sure I'm not

giving up. I'll run you clear across the Border if I have to."

He was trembling as they filed silently out of the room. O'Rourke picked up his account book and tried to enter figures from the bills beside it on the table, but his hand would form only scraggily misshapen lines that he couldn't read. He let the book fall back on the table, wondering what was wrong with him. The pulsating twang of the banjo floated softly into the room. O'Rourke found himself listening, and the music seemed to be trying to reach a part of him that he had long tried to suppress. He wondered if what Dan had said was true; that his heart was all dried up. And if it was true, did it make any difference?

O'Rourke intended to act immediately; order some action against the nester that would show him without question that his wish was law in the area he controlled. But the days slipped by and O'Rourke did nothing.

He told himself that by holding off he was giving the nester a chance to move out of his own accord.

But the fence remained, and Peterson showed no sign of abandoning his shack by the water hole.

Then Thompson brought O'Rourke news he could not ignore.

"Tom Clancy was riding over near the nester's and there was two of your cows wandering off from the others," the foreman told him. "When Tom came back, the cows was gone. He got a mite interested and he hung around a while. He saw Peterson and Dan Lavery cutting up some meat back of the shack, and they hung it up to dry just as open as could be. I reckon Lavery, when you run him off, went to work with Peterson. Looks like they're gitting back at you by rustling your meat and throwing it right in your face."

The foreman stopped. O'Rourke felt the fire inside him flare up. It didn't pay to get soft, even for a few days.

Someone was always ready to take advantage of it.

"The nester ain't botherin' me no more," O'Rourke said grimly. "Not after tonight."

HE WAS RIDING out across his fields with Thompson and Tom Clancy. The moon, almost full, covered the ground with a cool light as it came out from behind scudding clouds and the breeze sweeping over the open country was fresh and clean-smelling.

Jogging along silently in the darkness, hearing only the beat of hoofs against the earth and the creak of leather, O'Rourke's anger began to evaporate. He wondered again why he had not been able to find the contentment most men seem to know, at least at times, and then for a moment he had a wild desire to check his roan and turn back, leaving the nester to his bit of land. It was only a few acres, and he had more than he would ever really need. But such ideas were an expression of weakness, a weakness that was best buried inside him and ignored. It was by hiding the weakness from himself and the world that he had accomplished so much.

Thompson edged in close beside him, and the nearness of his foreman brought back to O'Rourke an assurance that had almost slipped away from him. He had to leave no doubt that the course he chose was the right course.

"You sure you want it this way?" Thompson asked, his voice sounding as if his throat were raw.

O'Rourke snorted. "You ain't in your right mind lately, Thompson. You know as well as me that in this country a man still has to look after his rights himself. I need that water."

O'Rourke was surprised his tone carried so much conviction. He wished he felt as sure as he sounded.

"With this wind there won't be no difficulty," Thompson said, after clearing his throat. "Only I ain't so certain there may not be trouble. The law's on Peterson's side."

"Damn the law!" O'Rourke said vehemently. "Anyway, who's to know we set the fire? Could be an accident."

"Yes, could be."

Thompson eased off, leaving O'Rourke alone again. O'Rourke wasn't at all sure now that Thompson wasn't right. But the

foreman had no right to question his employer's decisions. And this was no time to back down.

They came to the top of a rise, from which the range swept downwards to the waterhole and the shack of the nester. It showed up in the night as a dark, irregular blob against the plains. To the left was another blacker patch, a hollow ringed by clumps of scrub trees and bushes.

O'Rourke reined in and dismounted. He checked the direction of the breeze as Thompson and Tom Clancy rode over to him. He gave them crisp orders and they moved away on foot.

He watched the flicker of flames in the night, first to the right and then to the left. Grabbing up a handful of dry grass, O'Rourke held a match to it. The grass sputtered as it caught, and he dropped it to the ground, while the tang of smoke burned his nostrils. His heart was pounding against his ribs. As the wind caught the smouldering grass, it flared suddenly and then, with a crackling sound, a sheet of fire rose up into the blackness and began racing over the ground.

O'Rourke moved back, watching the dancing flames spread out. The wind was just right, enough to whip the fire along the dried grass. He saw that the fires the other men had started were widening out too, and it would not be long before the whole plain would become a sea of flames eating its way towards the nester's shack. Already the fire was on its way, a raging holocaust of destruction that no man could control.

IT WAS LIKE being hypnotized to watch the racing flame. O'Rourke hardly realized when he was rejoined by Tom Clancy and Thompson. The three moved up silently over the charred grass, after the advancing fire. A sudden gust of wind deflected the direction towards the left, so that a tongue of fire licked out towards the hollow. It didn't matter, O'Rourke thought. Anyway, what he had started was now beyond him.

The thought sent a chill over him, and an icy numbness momentarily drove all feeling and emotion from him. He reached up a hand, wiping away the beads of sweat that had formed on his forehead. He wished he had some water; his throat was parched.

The cries of his men seemed to come from far away. Slowly O'Rourke tried to concentrate, to bring his mind back to the realities of the moment. He did not know how long he had been standing there fighting the numbness that had held him powerless. He heard another shout, and recognized Thompson's voice calling to him from somewhere beyond the shimmering curtain of flames.

O'Rourke answered and swung himself into the saddle of his roan. He dug in his spurs, taking off towards the figures he could barely make out in the light from the fire. And then, as he approached them, he heard another sound above the crackling of flames. The sound of bellowing cattle and pawing hoofs. The sound of cows stampeding.

It took him a few moments to figure it out. There must have been a group of stray cattle in the hollow, and as the fire was surrounding them, they would be lost unless they could be driven to safety. Only fast work on the part of himself, Thompson and Tom Clancy could save them, and it would be dangerous work rounding up the crazed animals.

The need for immediate action drove all other thoughts from O'Rourke's mind. He was riding wildly, working with his two men to narrow the widening circle of confused, milling cattle. Once herded, there was still the problem of driving them out of the path of the flames.

The cows were beginning to respond to the riders when a spit of fire, in advance of the rolling sheet, sprang out towards O'Rourke. His roan suddenly reared in fright. The movement caught O'Rourke by surprise and he felt his boot slip out of his right stirrup and then he was off balance and falling. As the roan whinnied piteously, O'Rourke kicked his left foot free and went crashing to the ground. The roan took off across the plain.

O'Rourke landed hard on his shoulder, feeling a sudden wrench as the muscles

were twisted. His left leg was doubled up under his body, and when he tried to scramble to his feet the leg refused to bear his weight. He crumpled up again on the ground.

For a while he lay there without moving, while a strange dizziness swirled in his brain. He opened his eyes again to see that the area around him was all alight with an orange-red glare and he felt the dry breathless heat of fire beating at his face. He raised himself on his elbows, peered about, and found that he was almost surrounded by a furious blaze. Again he tried to get to his feet, but there was something seriously wrong with his leg. It was hard for him to breathe, too. If he didn't get away soon, he would be burned to ashes as surely as the dry grass around him.

Panic began clawing at him, and he tried to call out. He could see the riders, Thompson, Clancy, and a couple of others he could not recognize. They were ringing the cattle and slowly driving them to safety. O'Rourke cried out again, straining lungs that seemed choked with smoke.

Two other riders. He looked again, recognized the careless easiness in the saddle as Dan Lavery's. The tall slouched frame astride another horse could only be the nester. These two, enemies he was trying to destroy, were riding to his aid, trying to save his cattle.

O'Rourke felt weaker than before, and when he cried out again his voice was hardly more than a whisper. He thought, those cattle that disappeared near the nester's fence might easily have joined the strays in the hollow. Tom Clancy could have been wrong about the nester and Dan rustling them for meat. He buried his face in his hands to keep the heat from singeing his flesh.

A lot of things crowded into his mind, little things that he had not thought of for months, years even. There was a pattern to them that tried to take shape. He thought that now at last, when it was too late, he was beginning to understand himself.

A voice came to him above the roar of the flames.

"O'Rourke! O'Rourke!"

He uncovered his face and pushed up painfully to a sitting position.

"Here," he shouted.

Someone was crawling towards him. O'Rourke shielded his eyes from the searing heat. No one could reach him through that inferno. But a dark figure did emerge, came slowly up to him. He saw it was young Dan Lavery, his face streaked with soot and sweat.

"My leg," O'Rourke explained. "Can't stand."

Strong arms went around him, began pulling him up. Inch by inch he was being hoisted to Lavery's shoulder. The pain in O'Rourke's leg and shoulder was unbearable, the heat overpowering. His brain began clouding over again and he knew his consciousness was slipping away.

"Dan," he muttered. He wanted to tell Dan what he had learned about himself.

"Easy, O'Rourke."

The young puncher's voice was cool, assured. His arms around O'Rourke as he held him on his shoulder were sure and capable. He was beginning to walk, now, O'Rourke realized. Saving him. But why should Dan bother? What had O'Rourke ever done for Dan?

O'Rourke couldn't find an answer just then. The blackness was crowding in all around him and his thoughts were slipping away faster, too fast to hold on to any more.

THEY WERE all on the crest of the rise looking down at the nester's shack, now a raging column of flame that soared high into the night sky. O'Rourke saw the charred grass under his boots, the swirling flames, the lined face of the nester who stood mutely watching the ruin of his life's dream.

The eerie light from the fire cast flickering shadows over the nester's lean face. His jaw was firm, but there was pain in his eyes, the intense pain that is not born of physical suffering. O'Rourke turned his gaze abruptly away.

He could see only the backs of Dan Lavery and the nester's girl. The young puncher's arm was about her waist.

O'Rourke could read how Dan felt from the looseness of his young body and the sag of his broad shoulders. The arm about the girl drew a little tighter. O'Rourke could tell that these two were finding comfort in each other's nearness.

The physical hurt in O'Rourke didn't bother him any more. It was the turmoil that was chewing up his guts, that part of his nature he had always thought was weak and had tried to bury. He knew he had been wrong, now. These people had rallied to his aid when he needed help, not because of him, but out of common humanity. They weren't weak, they were stronger than he because they had not choked off the demands of their hearts. They could stand staring at the ashes of their lives and then pick themselves up and go on with a courage born of a kinship between them and their fellows. A kinship O'Rourke had tried to root out of his nature. He himself, in such adversity, would be broken because he had nothing to fall back on.

He began talking, more to himself than to the others.

"Before this country is built up there's going to be other fires, because for a while the rancher and the nester will be at war with each other. But there's room for both, and this country's going to be built up, nonetheless. We can start showing how right here and now, if you're willing. We'll just go ahead an build it together."

He saw Peterson turn and look at him as he was speaking. It had been a long while since anyone had looked at O'Rourke that way. It lifted a little of the heaviness from him.

O'Rourke was glad he had a good ranch, where he could take care of these homeless folks, and wealth, so that he could help them rebuild and restock the plot of land they owned. He owed them that. And much more.

His eye went back to Dan Lavery and the nester's daughter. A game lad, that Dan. O'Rourke would like him back, working for him. But maybe it was better not. He'd try to make up to Dan when it came time for a wedding gift. Meanwhile, a cowpoke and a nester's girl—that was the way it should be if this country was going to keep on growing.

Coming up in the next issue

NO HIDING PLACE

There are bad men within the law and good men outside it. But—can a good man be a bandit and a murderer?

A Magazine-Length Novel

By CHANDLER WHIPPLE

RIDE 'EM, ROXIE

Love of money—or hate of a girl with more courage than caution—drove two desperate men to try a rodeo murder

An Exciting Novelette

By ROE RICHMOND

Flower of the

WHEN QUINTON returned with his treasure he found that he was a wanted man — in more ways than one

THEY TURNED into the coolness of Rinconada Canyon, where the hoofs of their mounts and pack horses lifted clattering, erratic rhythm to the tune of the white man's song. It was pleasant here after the heat of the flat desert country, across which they had traveled steadily throughout that long day. Where a bend in the canyon faced them sharply eastward, the white man's song trailed off. He turned in his saddle, smiling, and waited for the sleepy Mexican to catch up.

"Pablo, my friend," he said cheerfully, "won't this great composition of mine keep you awake?"

The Mexican straightened quickly, his white teeth flashing in a smile.

"Is fine song, Señor Quinton," he said, nodding vigorously. "But there is one thing wrong."

"What is that, Pablo?"

"I find it hard to see this girl you sing about—this Rose Montague of Mesa Verde."

John Quinton's voice held feigned sternness. "Can that be true, Pablo? What do you see?"

"Is very strange, amigo," Pablo said solemnly. "I listen to your song, and see the cool forest at the edge of the Mescalero, and the waters of Rio Tularosa. I see the small place of my friend, old Juan Alcorcha, and the squashes lying like pieces of gold under the sun! Also, amigo, I see Juan's young daughter, Camelita with the shining eyes!"

"That child, Pablo? I could have rocked her on my knees!"

"Your song was made for her, my friend."

"I could span her waist," John Quinton said, "with my two hands."

"She would make fine wife for you, amigo."

John Quinton looked at his companion narrowly, but didn't answer.

"She is one of much loyalty and fortitude," Pablo pressed. "She is like the plant of the mescal, the yucca, the bright flower of the greasewood. She will not wither here, amigo, like the rose."

Quinton rubbed his bearded chin reflectively and laughed. "Pablo, I think you do not appreciate the effort required for a composition of

Mescalero

By Eric Allen

Sladen held the girl, a quirt in his hand

such depth and pathos. Listen to this song once more . . ."

"Amigo," Pablo said, lifting a restraining hand. "After a long absence from the desert, even the voice of the coyote is pleasant! But when night after night one must listen to that . . ."

John Quinton laughed and slapped the Mexican's shoulder. With one accord, they tugged at the lead ropes of their pack horses and rode on.

"Three more hours, Pablo," John Quinton said. "Then the quiet street of Mesa Verde, and the music of Duke Sladen's Casa Blanca . . . and my Rose Montague, of whom I sing!"

"There is one thing which troubles me, amigo," Pablo said softly. "This message you sent to her a month ago, about the silver."

"To Rose, Pablo?" Quinton's voice held irritation. "But she's my future wife."

"She works for this Sladen, my friend."

"What else can she do, Pablo? Beg in the street, while I hunt for buried treasure?"

Pablo was silent for a moment, then he said quietly, "I think, amigo, we should hide the money."

"For what reason?"

Pablo shrugged. "Is great dream, this treasure. It is like a miracle for me, Pablo, to help you find. This kind of fortune, is fickle, elusive . . . . perhaps like this Rose Montague, about whom you make the great song. One feels these strange things, and that is all, my friend."

QUINTON'S huge shoulders lifted in the suggestive shrug that could mean many things, or nothing, but he didn't answer. He turned in his saddle for a moment, glancing at the pack horse with its burden of silver, and the light of victory lay mirrored in his gray eyes. Truly, he thought, it had been a great dream. But soon the night would come, and the lights of Mesa Verde would lift like soft beacons, and he could sit his saddle proudly and think those thoughts of Rose Montague.

Never again could Duke Sladen point him out scornfully as the big man who shuffled maps and loafed in the street and dreamed of buried treasure. He could know, too, that when he brought this pack horse with its rich burden, Rose Montague would never again be forced to match the laughter of drunken men in Sladen's Casa Blanca. . . .

They left the canyon called Rinconada and struck a hard-packed trail, lined with patches of greasewood and twisted junipers. A flash of whiteness lay suddenly against the twilight, and John Quinton reined in.

"Reward posters, Pablo," he said. He urged his horse close, trying to read them, then leaned forward suddenly and said sharply, "Look at that, my friend!"

Pablo's dark glance followed Quinton's pointing finger. In the center of the cluster of posters was a new one, with the picture of a lean, clean-shaven face under a wide black hat. Wanted for Robbery was printed in bold-faced type.

"Truly, amigo," Pablo exclaimed, squinting at the picture, "that is the face of an ox!"

"You son-of-a-dog, Pablo!"

Pablo writhed around, staring. John Quinton's eyes held the brightness of anger, quick, unfeigned. During all those long months on the desert together, Pablo had never seen that look in his companion's eyes. "I could not know, amigo," Pablo said with soft contriteness. "It has been so long since I have seen your face without the beard."

John Quinton ripped the poster from the juniper and held it close, reading the description and relevant details in smaller type. His jaw tightened.

"Itinerant, hell," he said. "If ever a man has worked steady, Pablo, it is I."

"Si, señor." A note of reserve had crept into Pablo's voice. "When did you commit this crime?"

"Commit . . . . Pablo! Wipe that look off your—face of a goat! This thing is a damnable hoax."

Pablo's face was solemn. "I think, amigo, we should hide the silver."

John Quinton's face was thoughtful. "Perhaps we should. But where?"

Pablo smiled. "At this place of my friend Juan Alcorcha."

"That's all you talk, Pablo! Juan Alcorcha and his squashes, and his daughter, Carmelita with the shining eyes!"

THEY CAME up the course of the river under darkness, hearing the lift of night wind in the pines. They rode without speaking, thinking their own thoughts; and when lamplight shone abruptly through the trees ahead, they halted. Goat smell and the smell of burros lay heavily on the breeze, and the smell of chili and cooking food was strong.

"I think, amigo," Pablo said quietly, "that you should present the gift."

Quinton turned. "Gift?" he said sharply. "For whom?"

"Ah, my friend, do not have hesitation. With my own eyes I see you take the necklace from the cache that held the coins."

"Did you want the necklace, Pablo?"

"No, amigo. But these people are not peons."

"Only one woman will wear that necklace, Pablo," John Quinton said firmly. "Not Carmelita Alcorcha . . . with the shining eyes!"

Pablo sighed with resignation. They rode on. Lamplight shone from the house's open doorway, and when they halted John Quinton heard a torrent of rapid Spanish from inside. He swung from his horse, hearing Pablo's eager greeting. There was an instant's breathless quietness; then a slender figure stood in the open doorway, peering intently into the night.

"Carmelita!" Pablo said happily. "This is Pablo Armendez, and your good friend, Señor Quinton! Tell your father to come here."

The girl caught her breath and stood for a moment limned against the lamplight. John Quinton straightened and stared at her. Like a picture, he thought, blinking in disbelief. Then she turned and vanished, and Pablo's voice said mockingly:

"That child? . . . You span her now, amigo, with your two hands!"

"A year, Pablo, is a long time," John Quinton said.

Pablo laughed. "What do you think of her now, my friend?"

Quinton waited a moment, then said stonily, "I have a silver necklace, Pablo—for Rose Montague, of Mesa Verde."

The girl appeared again in the lamplight, ushering the stooped form of old Juan Alcorcha outside. Quinton shook hands with him, his eyes still fastened upon Carmelita. Pablo's greeting was fast and profuse as he led the old man into the shadows. Quinton followed.

"We would like, Juan," Pablo said softly, "to hide our silver."

"Silver?" Juan raised astonished eyes.

"Enough to be dangerous," Pablo said grimly. "Do you not have a good place, my friend?"

"Come," Juan Alcorcha said, turning. Leading their horses, Quinton and Pablo followed him along the river shore. The old man skirted his field of corn and squashes and halted at last under a sandstone bluff. "Here," he said, and waited.

For a long time, John Quinton and Pablo worked under the bluff without speaking. Then they led their horses back to the house and unsaddled and fed them. Later, Juan Alcorcha ushered them into his home.

CARMELITA met them, her slender brown hands outstretched, her soft English like music in the tiny room. Her eyes held a dazzling luster above the bright splash of a crimson shawl. Looking into them, John Quinton had a momentary sensation of sinking into a sea of swirling indigo. He flushed behind his beard, and released her hand quickly, conscious of Pablo's intent quietness.

"Carmelita," Quinton said, striving for nonchalance. "You have grown."

She looked up at him archly. "And you, señor, have grown also—a very beautiful beard!" She laughed. "The water is warming for you to shave!"

"After we eat, querida mia!" Pablo warned.

Carmelita laughed, arranging bowls of steaming food on the table. When Juan Alcorcha took his hat, Quinton stood ill at ease, watching the girl's hurried footsteps

in her bright red sandals. Her body had a lithe quick grace under those yards of gaudy clothing. John Quinton felt the pound of blood in his strong neck, and awareness of it brought vague anger. Those months on the desert had been long ones indeed.

They ate under the yellow lamplight, and later Quinton shaved. It was an ordeal, and restlessness was riding him, but he performed the task with determined patience.

"Señor Quinton!" Carmelita exclaimed. "But you are so young!" She came close to him, touching his face with cool fingers. Then she stepped back, laughing, and Pablo's laughter filled the room. Quinton reached for his battered hat.

"Gracias, señorita . . . señor," he said, bowing and smiling. "I go now to a cantina I remember, to top off this good food."

Juan Alcorcha rose. "At Sladen's Casa Blanca," he said, "there is nothing, now, to drink."

"No?"

"He smuggled the pòison tequila," Juan Alcorcha said, "to the Mescalero Apaches. The law closed him up for drinking. He only sells the food."

Quinton stood in indecision, his mind filled with quick conjectures. Carmelita had left the room, but now she returned, holding a woven scarf of purple and gold. She held it out and said simply. "I make for you señor, while you are gone."

"Gracias, señorita." He was taken aback. "It is too much." Abruptly, the room was quiet. His restlessness intensified. He pulled his hat down tight and turned. "*Hasta la mañana*, Pablo!"

"You ride alone, my friend?"

Quinton nodded.

"This picture with the poster, amigo—you have no fear?"

"None." Quinton paused, throwing the purple and gold scarf across his shoulder. Carmelita stood quietly with folded hands, the soft light spilling golden mist about her raven hair. Her face looked golden too, Quinton thought, changing and alive as she turned toward him.

He looked at her, thinking irrelevantly of bare brown feet moving through the dust between old Juan's long rows of corn and squashes; thinking, too, of her slender back bending to wield the hoe. He reached into his pocket, glancing quickly at Pablo. The silver necklace had a fragile glitter, a pleasant coolness in his hands. He moved close to Carmelita and held it out.

She took the necklace quietly, looking into his face. Behind the astonishment in her flashing glance he saw the quick light of wonder. He bowed, smiling, and stepped into the night.

He had his horse saddled and was starting to mount when light footfalls sounded behind him. He turned.

"Gracias, Señor Quinton, for the gift."

There was no coquetry now in her whispered words; only thanks that came to her lips from her heart. The sound of her voice stilled John Quinton. He held the reins of his horse, acutely aware of her closeness, remembering the look of her face in the lamplight. In the same instant, he remembered Rose Montague.

"It was nothing, Carmelita," he said quickly. "A gesture of friendship, and appreciation for your good food and hospitality. I could have given nothing less."

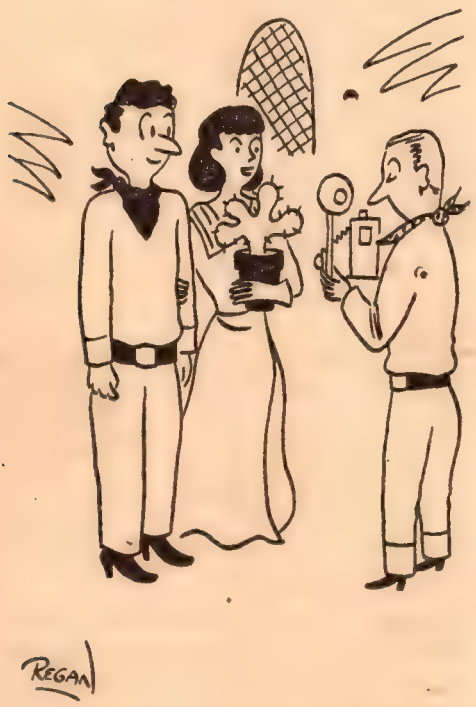
She didn't answer. Quinton swung to the saddle. Then, like a slender wraith in the darkness, she turned and was gone.

LIGHTS from windows and open doorways threw a flickering mantle across the dusty street of Mesa Verde. About all that quiet town on the edge of the Mescalero country was a brooding sense of waiting, as if for a long time the town had been aware of his coming and had prepared for it. Quinton halted his horse, shrugging the feeling aside, reveling in his return.

One year ago, on such a night as this, he had stood behind Duke Sladen's Casa Blanca, with Rose Montague in his strong arms and a mount and pack horse waiting in the street. Many things had been inside John Quinton that night, but the biggest things were hope and determination. Out there beyond the green hills, beyond the first dry expanse of sagebrush and ocotillo, lay the floor of the desert proper—and out of that land he would wrest his fortune. He had researched diligently; the maps

did not lie, and some deep instinct had told him it was there. It was, as Pablo had said, a great dream . . . and now the tangible fruit of that dream belonged to John Quinton.

Suddenly he thought of the reward poster bearing the picture of his own face, and conflicting thoughts rode his mind for an instant. Whatever his attitude in front of Pablo, that poster had sponsored a quick unease. But he would find out soon. He



rode on into the center of town and dismounted in front of Duke Sladen's Casa Blanca.

Eagerness was pushing him now. The place held a quietness that in another time would have made him walk with care. But now his eyes were riveted through the pane of the big front window, drinking in the sight of Rose.

She stood leaning across the polished bar, talking to Duke Sladen. Even from this distance, Quinton could see the ivory-white gleam of her arms and shoulders, and the soft rounded contour of her face. He saw her ash-blonde hair lying in soft ringlets, and the glowing ruby pendant in the delicate lobe of her ear. Quinton smiled and squared his shoulders, and took the rough plank sidewalk in two long strides.

He tipped the batwings open and halted. The place was empty except for Duke and Rose. They turned to look at him; and casually he strode forward, his boots scuffing thinly on the gritty floor. Then Rose Montague let out a startled breath and rushed around the bar toward him.

"John!"

John Quinton laughed and swept her up, holding her close.

"Oh, John," she cried, "it's been so long!" She pushed him back, yet holding him, standing on her toes to look into his face.

Duke Sladen was standing, his face touched with the remembered cynical smile, but he was stretching forth his hand. Quinton hesitated, then took it. Sladen's slate-black eyes, instant with their movement, took Quinton in from sole to crown.

"Congratulations, Quinton," he said. "I heard you struck it rich."

"Did you?" Quinton spoke quietly, trying to conceal his surge of joy at sight of Rose. Then something in Duke's voice hit him strangely, and he straightened up. "Who told you, Duke?"

"Why, I did, silly," Rose Montague said. She leaned against Quinton, pressing his hand. "You sent me a message . . . remember? You said I wouldn't have to wait much longer, that you were close to it. Naturally, I told Duke."

Quinton looked at her. "Naturally," he said.

"But, John, what in the world is wrong with that?"

Duke Sladen said curtly, "Cut the palaver, Rose. Set up the drinks."

"I heard you didn't sell it, Duke," Quinton said.

Duke Sladen's eyes were hard. "We hear things, don't we, Quinton?" He turned to Rose. "I'll see you later, to pick

up the day's receipts." He took a malacca cane from its place beside the bar and strolled leisurely through the batwings and into the street.

ROSE MONTAGUE rushed around the bar, reaching beneath it to produce a bottle. The cork popped under her fingers, and Quinton saw that her hands were shaking as she set the bottle down. He spun a stool and straddled it, reaching for her hands. Under the pressure of his strong fingers the trembling ceased. She leaned toward him.

"Drink, John . . . quickly . . . and tell me everything."

"Let the bottle wait." He searched her face intently, aware of a strangeness, a brittle quality about her smile. A year in this place could do that to a woman, he thought bitterly. "I'm taking you out of here tomorrow, Rose. We'll build us a place on the edge of the desert . . . a good place with windmills and running water. Lots of fine saddle horses, and cattle scattered like walking poker chips across the range."

"It sounds as if you have a fortune, John." She squeezed his hands. "Did you bring it here?"

"It would be very foolish to do so, señorita," a voice from the doorway said.

Rose lifted her head, startled, and John Quinton turned. Pablo shuffled inside quietly, his white teeth gleaming in a smile. He took a stool beside Quinton, but Quinton didn't speak. Irritation at being interrupted was plain in Quinton's glance. Pablo caught the look and his face grew solemn.

"I was forced to come here, my friend."

"I suppose your thirst forced you, Pablo," Quinton said. "Or was it only curiosity?"

"Neither, amigo." With cool deliberation, Pablo reached into a pocket of his faded trousers. "Carmelita Alcorcha insisted that I find you, at once, and return the gift." The silver necklace made a soft jangle of finality as he dropped it on the bar in front of Quinton. Then Pablo stood up.

"Why should she do this, Pablo?" Quinton asked.

Pablo shrugged, watching the slender fingers of Rose Montague lifting the necklace. "Carmelita has the delicate sensitivity of a flower," he said. "After you ride away, she comes into the house with tears in her eyes. She holds this necklace and says to me: 'Pablo, this was only given in payment for the food, and the hot water Señor Quinton used to shave off his beard. The house of my father charges neither for water or food. Return this pay, Pablo, at once!'" Pablo lifted his shoulders again. "What could I do?"

Rose Montague's eyes were bright and wide, fastened upon Quinton's face. "You didn't think of a gift for me, did you, John?" she said icily.

Quinton looked at her, starting to speak, but the flame behind her lovely eyes held him stilled. He was aware of the tense quietness and of Pablo's footsteps breaking that quietness as he moved toward the door. He heard the batwings swish open and close behind Pablo, but still Quinton didn't answer.

THE GIRL said tightly, dropping the necklace onto the bar: "Who is she, John?"

"Only a friend." When the angry flame in her eyes didn't diminish, he went on quietly, "I used to go there, talking with her father of old legends. They were kind to me."

"Who is she, John?"

He said reluctantly, "Carmelita Alcorcha. I stopped there tonight, to shave off a year's growth of whiskers before I came to you."

"Carmelita Alcorcha," Rose said softly. She leaned toward him, relief crossing her face. "I know them, John. Poor Mexicans who live on the river, near the huge sandstone caverns below the Mesa Verde trail." She caught his hands suddenly, laughing with forgiveness. "It was silly of me, John, to be jealous. But you haven't answered my question, the one I asked when Pablo interrupted. Is the treasure you found outside, on your horse?"

Quinton smiled. "Did you think one horse could carry me and the silver too? That silver is safe, Rose, but no one will

know where until I'm ready. Knowledge of where that silver is hidden could be dangerous."

"Even to you?"

"Maybe." His face sobered, and he withdrew a hand from hers and reached into his pocket. "Take a look at that, and tell me what it means?"

She took the reward poster and spread it out. Her long lashes lowered, covering her violet eyes. "I—wondered if you knew."

The batwing doors parted behind John Quinton, letting a breath of wind fan the lights. It was a chilly wind, tingling against Quinton's neck. He stiffened with a sixth-sense warning, then slowly turned.

Duke Sladen said from the doorway. "I thought of that poster myself."

The round hole in the muzzle of Duke's gun had the yawning blackness of impending death. The gun lay stone-steady in his pallid hand, pointing at John Quinton. Quinton froze.

"That's right, Quinton! Don't move! Rose, take his gun—quick!"

"Duke, stop it!" Her voice was shrill. "It isn't your job to do this."

Duke said thinly, "The marshal didn't want to take him tonight. Said wait till morning. . . ." His lips had a wolfish snarl. "Get it, damn you, before I blow him apart! I won't take chances!"

She stretched across the bar. "I'll have to do it, John."

Quinton nodded, crumpling the poster in tense hands. Rose lifted his gun slowly, dropping it with a thud. Quinton saw the fear in her eyes, and could hear the rapid sound of her breathing. Duke said sharply, "Stand up!" When Quinton obeyed, Duke sidestepped the batwings, motioning with his gun. "Whether he likes it or not, the marshal will have to lock you up."

JAIL was a musty place, dry and airless. Only one small window, strongly barred, let in a flicker of far-away lamplight. Jake Gilford, the marshal who had reluctantly locked Quinton in, stood quietly in the dark corridor outside the tiny cell. Duke Sladen had gone.

"One question, Gilford," John Quinton said. "Who had that poster struck, and why?"

"It was the Ysleta stage, Quinton. It was robbed and the driver killed, and Sladen brought the stage in and said he saw you do it. It was a pretty thin story, but somehow he made it stick. I think Sladen has warmed some palms around here, but when he started peddling whisky to the Mescalero Apaches, the Government stepped in. He's washed up now, selling out and leaving. He wanted to strike hard at you before he goes."

"Why?"

Gilford dropped his cigarette and stamped it out. "Hell, Quinto," he said harshly. "You're a fool!" He waited, watching Quinton's tightening face. "Everybody knows how you took to Rose Montague from the first day you drifted in. But a thin veneer of beauty can cover a multitude of sins! She's no good, Quinton! She's got Sladen's brand on her. It can't be blotted out by you or any other man!"

"I'll cram that down your throat, Gilford!" Quinton said. "She had to work for a living! You know that!"

"She's staying with Sladen," Gilford said grimly, "when there's no longer any job."

John Quinton stared at the marshal, feeling the oppressive closeness of the cell that hemmed him in. The floor of the jail was hard under his boot heels, and light from the small barred window caught the set look of concentration on his face. Into the momentary silence came the sound of hoofbeats, traveling fast.

"Gilford," Quinton said suddenly, "I've got to get out of here."

"It'd be a pleasure, Quinton, if you had anything for bond."

"I've got a fortune in silver, Gilford, out at—" Quinton paused. He was aware suddenly of metallic hardness under the poster he still clenched in his hand. He opened his hand quickly, remembering the silver necklace that Rose Montague had contemptuously dropped on the Casa Blanca bar. Absently, thinking of Carmelita Alcorcha, Quinton had picked it up. "Sure," he said now, "I've got the bond. Something worth plenty, right here in my hand."

QUINTON paused outside the jail office, feeling the touch of night wind on his face. Lights of the town had dwindled; the tall windows of the Casa Blanca were darkened, but a crescent moon shone softly above timbered ridges toward the west. He moved quietly then, his boots soft as a cat's paw on the board walk. His horse stood where he had left it, ground-anchored, patient in the night. Quinton rose to the saddle, turning the animal about.

A shadowy figure darted from the mouth of an alley. Quinton paused. Under the rising moonlight he saw the peak of a wide sombrero.

The next instant he heard Pablo's quiet voice.

"They've got a good start, amigo. Perhaps too much."

Quinton's voice was brittle. "Duke, and Rose?"

Pablo nodded. "They ride out fast, amigo, toward the river trail. I wanted to follow, but needed to get you out of that stinking jail. I had started there with a gun when I saw you coming. They want the treasure, my friend."

"It's a hard thought, Pablo."

"Si, amigo. But not a hopeless one."

"You go tell Gilford, Pablo. Bring him to Juan Alcorcha's place. I'll ride ahead."

Hoofs of his horse raised muted thunder, pounding under a swirling pall of gritty dust. . . .

The Rio Tularosa was a sinuous thread of silver under the sentinel fringe of pines. John Quinton halted his winded horse and sat in the saddle, listening. A gleam of lamplight spilled from the house at the river's edge, and the smell of young corn, of goats and burros and ripe squashes, touched his nostrils. A quietness of waiting lay somberly over all that moonlit land, stilling for an instant the chaotic thoughts that rode his mind. Then the sound of a scream knifed through that silence, and Quinton spurred forward again.

Caution slowed him when he reached the field. He rode between the rows of corn and squashes, the dust of the mulchy earth muffling his horse's hoofbeats. He heard the scream again, pleading, urgent, and he halted his horse near the doorway and swung down.

Quinton's eyes took in the scene in one swift glance. Old Juan Alcorcha sprawled half across the threshold, struggling to rise upright, wiping blood that streamed from his forehead from a gunsight wound. Carmelita cringed in a corner of the room, terror making luminous pools of her black eyes.

Duke Sladen held the girl, a quirt in his big hand, and beside him stood Rose Montague.

Duke's voice was ruthless. "Where's the silver? Tell me now, or I'll beat you half to death!"

"I do not know, señor! They told me nothing! I . . ."

"Hit her, Duke! Make her tell!"

John Quinton flinched, staring at Rose Montague. In the soft glow of lamplight her face was clearly visible; the tipped-up nose, the burnished ivory of her upflung chin, the creamy throat diminishing at the swelling outline of her frilled bodice. But the sound of her voice when she screamed the order at Sladen chilled Quinton through and through.

The film of disbelief left his eyes as he leaped across the threshold, his voice lashing a curse at Duke Sladen.

DUKE SLADEN wheeled, his eyes protruding from their sockets. For the space of a heartbeat he seemed turned to stone. Then the quirt dropped from his hand, and the hand flashed downward; and in that instant John Quinton remembered that Rose had taken his own gun.

Concussion doused the lights, but Quinton was moving. He ducked and angled sideward, crouched in the sudden darkness, thankful that Sladen's urgency had thrown the first shot wild. He heard Rose Montague scream and felt her brush past him, running for the door. Then gunflame lit Sladen's face and Quinton saw the terror, the savage frustration. Quinton sprang forward.

The gun discharged with a spasmodic re-

bound that threw powder-flame close against his bunching shoulders, but Sladen's face was mush against his driving fist. Sladen's gun dropped soddenly, and Sladen gasped and moved backward. When Quinton caught him with the second blow, he sucked in a gurgled breath, and then he folded.

Horses were halting beyond the doorway, and when Quinton reached the threshold, he saw Pablo holding onto Rose Montague.

"I could not shoot, amigo," Pablo yelled. "I feared for Carmelita, and then this—tigress came! What shall I do with her, my friend?"

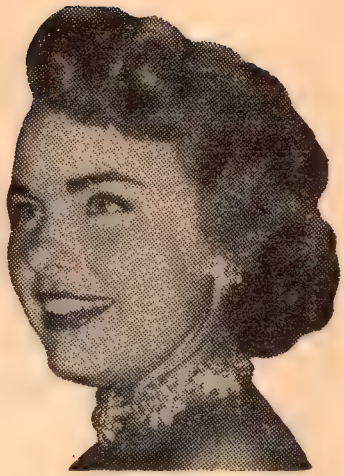
"I'll take care of both of them," Jake Gilford said. He moved past Quinton, staring down at Duke Sladen. "Neat, Quinton! I think you'll be able to forget that reward poster. This looks like a clear-cut case of framing."

Quinton's voice came low and strained through fast breathing. "You were right, Gilford," he said, staring at Rose Montague. "I was a fool. Sladen was broke, and he didn't get much from that stage, I guess, but Rose gave him a secret where he could get a lot more. With me framed for murder and robbery, they could have skipped the country with everything I had."

Quinton turned then, striking a match and lighting the kerosene lamps. He saw Carmelita Alcorcha kneeling beside her father, wiping blood from his bewildered face. Old Juan was coming out of it fast, forcing a relieved smile at sight of Quinton. When Gilford hauled Duke Sladen to his feet and led him forcibly through the doorway, Carmelita glanced at Quinton and stood up.

It was strange that it should be this way each time he looked at her, John Quinton thought; even after the stress of action. He smiled, and the blood was fast in his strong throat, and deep inside him was a touch of weakness.

That slender back of hers, he thought, could soon stop bending to the hoe.



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The Talking Medicine

By
Talmage Powell

Singing Waters gasped and tried to hide herself

AS THE FIRST arrow whispered past his scalp to *thunk* into the side of his wagon, Sam Tucker decided the major's warning had been sensible. Action and mental cogitation went hand in hand for a man who had lived for some time by his wits. Sam kicked his coffee pot over the campfire and rolled to one side as a second arrow hissed at him.

The fire died with a quick sizzle. Lying in the shadows with six-shooter in hand and heart pounding so hard they must have heard it in China, Sam scanned the night before him. How many Indians

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SAM TUCKER USED his magic to save a friend—and woo a Sioux maiden

there were or where they had come from were questions to be answered later. Doubtless it was a small party, perhaps a single scout, who had seen his fire.

The major in command of the fort had warned him. "Somebody has been getting rifles into Crow hands. Not healthy for a lone white man to wander up those backtrails alone. We're doing everything we can to avoid incidents, while trying to get at the bottom of this rifle running. We've got to stop it soon or it'll mean the massacre of outlying settlers, a small war with the Crow Indians. I don't want any fool medicine pedlars touching off the powder keg."

That had been final.

Sam had stalked from the major's office. He had promised to meet Buffalo Biddix, the herb gatherer, on Macklin's Branch. The old man was depending on it. If there was Indian trouble in the air, it was good reason to be at the appointed spot. Old Buffalo was just the kind to take root at the meeting place, come hell or high danger. Biddix would stay put, depending on Sam, worrying about him, until food was gone—or until marauding Crow braves had spotted him and combed his hair with a scalping knife.

Sam had therefore gone up the branch. He had waited now for two days, the cloud of worry about Buffalo gathering ever heavier in his mind. Now he wondered if the silent treachery of the arrows was a clue to Buffalo's fate.

Sam inched forward, eyes straining into the velvet of the star-studded night. He had a yen to say: "Look, you characters, I'm one-quarter Cherokee myself, from my mother's father. Couldn't we pow-wow over this thing?"

He saw a flicker of movement at the edge of the clearing. He followed it with the six-shooter; then he squeezed the trigger. He heard the scream of a wounded man, and experienced quick amazement at his marksmanship.

He was already rolling to one side, and a rifle was cracking down near the creek. He could hear the slugs beeing around his head and wondered if attack from this new quarter meant there was a whole party of them.

He clamped his teeth to keep them from rattling like a pair of wild castanets, and made his way on his belly toward the creek.

THE RIFLE was still now. Only the gurgling water broke the silence of the night. Then a twig snapped. Sam began shooting, and the rifle talked back.

Again silence, followed by the thud of light, running feet. A horse whickered; then its hoofbeats crossed the creek and the silence dissolved that noise too.

Sam reloaded his gun, gulping for breath; sweat was streaming down his face, and he thought with some respect of the man who'd occupied his skin a few minutes ago.

Cautious, he moved to the creek. The moon rode free of clouds and spilled cool silver on him. No more warriors threatened his life, and he breathed easier.

In the soft bank of the creek, he found a moccasin print. He bent and examined it closely. He wouldn't forget it in a hurry. The Indian had been big-footed, and he had left a distinct mark. At some time in the past, the moccasin had been cut across the sole, perhaps on a sharp rock. It had been laced back together with a fine rawhide thong, leaving a faint ridge across the sole which had imprinted itself in the soft earth.

Sam moved from the creek to prowl toward the warrior who had screamed in reply to the pistol's bark. He held his gun at full cock, his nerves so tense the whisper of a leaf might have caused him to squeeze the trigger. He found the warrior two dozen yards from the camp site. The buck was tall, lithe, and bronze. A Crow. Sam knew that from the paint markings and sensed it from the odor.

His lucky slug had caught the Crow squarely in the chest. Bright crimson shone against the duller red of the Indian's flesh, and a thread of blood crawled from the corner of the wide, thin-lipped mouth.

Sam knelt beside the Indian, and the brave opened his eyes. They were already glazing in death. The brave tried to spit in Sam's face.

"The other white man," Sam demanded. "The old one with the jacket of buffalo hide."

"He will die," the Indian made it sound like a satisfied curse. "Running Elk will kill him."

With that, the brave died.

Sam sat back on his haunches. He thumbed his wide-brimmed hat back. He tried to reconcile the two statements. "He will die." That meant Buffalo was in the hands of the Indians, but still alive. Still a chance for him, if his young partner could get to him.

Then his mind came back to the second statement. "Running Elk will kill him." But Running Elk was a Sioux chief, and the Sioux hated the Crow.

Sam was not a man who experienced any great yen for danger, violence, or hard labor. But the task was clearly before him. Seek out Running Elk; then if Buffalo was there, bring him out to safety.

Sam considered the warrior, who possessed one thing that might be very handy in powwowing with the Sioux. With a grimace and gulping effort to keep his stomach in place, Sam unsheathed his knife and lifted the Crow's scalp.

BATHING in the crystal clear waters of T'yehkeela were three Indian maids. Each was beautiful as they splashed and shouted laughter. But one, Singing Waters, was of a perfection to reduce the other two to beggary. She was tall, lithe, straight as the arrow of a chieftain. The water and sunlight made satin of the deep rose of her naked shoulders. Her hair was long, gleaming black, falling about the delicate planes of her face, a glinting cloud free of its braid at the moment.

Then one of the girls saw the horseman come over the rise, uttered a shriek, and the three covered themselves to their necks with water and stared fearfully.

They saw a heavy, big-hocked horse that would have been more in place before a wagon than under a saddle. They saw a rangy, big-boned young man astride the animal. He was handsome, with a square face, deeply weathered, and dark brown eyes. He wore a black mustache and his hair long in the fashion of the buffalo hunters, curling from under his hat about his neck.

He wore a rather dandified suit of black, dusty now from the trail. And the girls did not miss the fact that he was heavily armed, with a knife and two sixguns showing under his open coat, and a carbine in his saddle boot.

Singing Waters gasped. From the stranger's saddle hung a gory hank of black hair—a scalp.

The stranger saw the girls and endured a moment of confusion before a slow smile lighted his face. Singing Waters felt the fascination of the smile. Even through her fear, she found herself thinking the smile was nice.

The stranger swept off his wide-brimmed hat and bowed in the saddle. In the most imperfect Sioux Singing Waters had ever heard, he said, "My spirit is suddenly refreshed and weariness drops from me."

That, Singing Waters thought grimly as she got control of her fear, is exactly what we're afraid of.

In English learned at the mission school, she said, "Go away!"

The stranger's eyes rested on her. She felt warm color come into her cheeks. Strangely, her fear took wings on the afternoon breeze. Then she glanced guiltily, as if fearful her companions could read the unbidden thoughts the stranger's smile tricked into her mind.

Grinning, the stranger said, "I come as a friend, seeking the great chief Running Elk."

"His camp is down the vale," Singing Waters said. "His braves will spit you over their fires if you do not go away."

"A horrible fate," he managed in his mutilated Sioux, "but one to which I might readily resign myself with the image of

creation's masterpiece fresh in my mind."

Before Singing Waters could reply, he had gallantly turned his horse, his back toward the creek as he waited. The girls scrambled out of the creek. As she dressed in the shelter of a bush, Singing Waters decided the young white man was to be trusted. Not once did he steal a glance over his shoulder.

SAM TUCKER was aware of the lissom Indian girl all the way to the village. Every time he happened to catch her eye, he felt a jolt. He wondered if she felt it too. He thought of her marrying some buck and having to do the work and carry the water until the young proud shoulders had grown slumped and old. The thought disturbed him strangely; but even more disturbing was the possibility of her being married already.

His face darkened. Misbegotten fool, he thought, you came here to find Buffalo Biddix, as loyal a sidekick as a man ever had. Is your purpose so weakling in nature that it dissipates at the mere sight of a perfectly sculptured face and a long, easy stride that means she has trim ankles and slender legs?

They came upon a group of near-naked children, who shrieked and ran. And before them a silence settled as they reached the edge of the camp.

The site was a niche of paradise, nestled alongside the flashing creek, sheltered by tall poplar and oaks, kissed by the softest breeze from the mountains in the north; but there was hell in the camp, too, for the white man who dared enter. Sam could feel the grimness in the silence, the pressure of eyes masked with stolidity. The Sioux were at peace, but this was not the welcome of peace. Rifles were already in the hands of a few of the Crow. Sioux trouble next? Sam felt his forehead ice with beady sweat as he thought of settlers in the remote coves. He had seen massacre once; that was enough to last a lifetime.

Why it should be so, he did not know. He tried to tell himself he was wrong, letting his imagination run away with him. But he had studied Indian faces far too long to fool himself. The Sioux would fight, like any proud people, only if they thought they were being wronged. And their eyes told Sam that wrong had been done them.

A tall buck detached himself from the crowd lined up before the tipis. He was tall, powerfully built, with flat muscles rippling across his shoulders, chest, and down his arms. He had the chiseled face of a fighting man and eyes capable of great anger.

The buck grasped Singing Waters by the wrist and jerked her toward him. He stood blocking Sam's path. He said to Singing Waters: "Has this sputum of a sick fox spoken to you?"

Sam understood the words. But he remained loose and relaxed in the saddle, his hands crossed on saddlehorn, ready to reach for both guns at once.

"It was a chance meeting," Singing Waters said. "He acted with only respect. Let him pass, Strong Boy."

Strong Boy made no move. The girl jerked her wrist from his grip. Anger was in her face; but she seemed to realize that she would seal the white man's doom if she shamed the warrior. She said beseechingly, "He is but a lone man who acted with humility, coming in peace. It would not be honorable to block his path longer, and certainly not worthy of Strong Boy."

Strong Boy stood aside. Sam hoped his effort to swallow his heart back into place was not visible.

Usually gangs of screeching urchins would plague his stirrups, but they were held quiet now behind their mothers' skirts as he moved across the compound.

He brought his horse to rest before Running Elk. He wondered if the old chief remembered him. Then he decided an Indian never forgets.

RUNNING ELK, as a warrior, had killed the great bear. He still stood tall, proud, and fierce. Yet age had taken the flesh from his strong bones, leav-

ing him gaunt, with the face of an eagle.

Sam dismounted with an assurance he did not feel. "Is this the welcome of Running Elk?"

The old chief remained silent, his eyes like live coals under his hanging brows.

"Perhaps you don't remember the great medicine of Tucker."

"I remember," Running Elk conceded. "You came to my tribe with your bitter brew when the great aches came to our bellies, making the strongest man roll upon the earth wth great moans."

"I cured many of your warriors."

"True."

"I cured you."

"And for that reason, your life is not forfeit now. You may dwell in peace until the sun comes from his resting place with the morning. Then you must go, Tucker."

Sam faced the chief squarely with contempt edging his face. "Are these the words of Running Elk, the killer of the great bear? He would turn aside his friend who comes in peace?"

"Your own kind has turned you aside, Tucker, by giving guns to the Crow. Again the white man conspires against the Sioux. Your kind would set Crow against Sioux and use that as the excuse to bring in soldiers with the great thunder guns that roll on wheels. You would burn our camps and kill our people."

"Has Running Elk been touched wtih the tongue of the serpent?" Sam asked. And the darkening of the chief's face made his heart lurch with the certainty that he had pushed his words too far. Running Elk stepped once pace toward him, hands clenching as his sides. Tucker's every muscle wanted to retreat, but instead he stepped one pace toward the Indian. They were close enough for their breathing to mingle.

Running Elk said, "We know you are as many as the sands of the sea. We know we cannot win. We can only die as men should die. Unbroken, unconquered. Now you try my patience, Tucker."

"And you mine," Sam said. He moved to his horse, removed the Crow scalp. "By this scalp I swear that the whites wish to live in peace with the great Sioux people."

"Then why sell guns to the Crow?"

"There are evil persons in any race."

"True."

"And this scalp has spoken to me. It tells me you have in your power a man, a wearer of a buffalo jacket, and the scalp says this man is innocent of any wrongdoing and must be permitted to go with me."

Running Elk regarded Sam and then the scalp with narrowed eyes. "You know a scalp cannot speak," he said, but there was uncertainty in his voice. He had seen many powerful things of his own medicine man. And this white man had once showed them the most powerful medicine of all, rabbits coming from high silk hats, scarves ripped in shreds only to reappear whole. And the bitter brew that chased the great ache from the belly.

Sam shook the scalp. Distinctly, it said, "Release the wearer of the buffalo jacket."

THERE was a gasp from the assembled men of the council at Running Elk's back. Women muttered and hid their children and covered their own heads.

Even the warrior, surly-faced, sullen-lipped Strong Boy took a step back from his position where he could threaten the white man who had brought Singing Waters into camp.

"I lifted this scalp from the head of a hated Crow," Sam said, "and rode far to present it to my good friend Running Elk. But he must do as the scalp commands."

Running Elk turned to his council members. There was the buzz of discourse among them.

Running Elk turned back to Sam. There was greed in his eyes as he regarded the scalp. Then he spread his hands. "The council says the scalp does not know the truth. The wearer of the buffalo jacket was caught breaking open a case of guns." He reached out. Trying to appear nonchalant, he suggested, "I will accept the gift of my friend Tucker."

Sam glanced at the scalp, raised his brows, and then leaned his ear close to the gory hank. "The scalp will not change owners until I have been permitted to talk with the buffalo jacket."

Running Elk's lips thinned; he deliberated. But he was unable to keep his eyes from the talking scalp. "This you may do. You may speak as long as this twig burns in the fire." He tossed a small branch on the glowing embers off to one side.

"Look, Pete. I hit the jackpot."

Sam tucked the scalp in his belt and turned to follow Running Elk.

He saw the girl Singing Waters watching him. She gave him a smile, and he had to gulp. Then Strong Boy moved to her side, glaring.

When they had passed, Sam asked Running Elk: "Her husband?"

"No. He fevers for her, but her father demands many ponies, and he is poor, the son of One Who Turns Men's Heads and a brave who died of disease."

Sam for some reason felt better, though he was plagued by the thought that he had years enough and more on him. Twenty-seven, last spring. High time he had a wife. And then the inevitable thought: Indian wife? Well, why not? She had been to mission school. Her English showed that. She knew the ways of his people. She could take her place among them.

Running Elk stopped before a tipi at which two braves stood guard, erect as the war lances held at their sides.

Sam pushed into the gloom behind Running Elk. There was the smell of earth and fresh sleeping boughs cut from the pines and firs. A gentle snore broke the silence.

Sam followed the snore to its source. Buffalo Biddix lay on his side, lips fluttering with each outgoing breath. With his bulk in repose, Buffalo looked like a peaceful, chubby child. His face was round, his hair a spare, limp silver, his nose a red button.

Sam nudged him with his toe. Buffalo suspiciously opened one eye, and then the other. He sat up quickly.

"Thought they had to come to put me through the ordeal," he said. "How are you, boy?" He drew on his boots, stood up.

Running Elk said, "Until the twig burns," and went out of the tipi.

"You old galoot," Sam said, "can't you stay out of trouble when my back is turned?"

"Just naturally follows me," Buffalo said in resignation. "I am coming out of the mountain with a burro loaded with herbs when I make camp and find this case of guns stashed in a hollow beside the creek. Naturally I am surprised by this find, and I am breaking the case open to make sure, when I am set upon by three Sioux braves. Must have been tracking me. Nothing I say convinces them I am innocent as a baby. They bring me here. Out of past friendship, Running Elk tells me that I am to have a chance to tell them who left the guns there for me. No talk, and I'll be put to the test by fire. Hell of a thought. They

treat me pretty well, but they're getting out of patience. Thought sure they was coming for me this time."

IT SOUNDED about as bad as it could get, Sam decided. He gripped Buffalo's shoulder. "When you didn't show on Macklin Branch, I set out. Now I've found you, we'll figure some way out of this."

Buffalo scratched under his armpits. "We better figure fast. I ain't hankering to carry on a conversation with their fire god."

Sam went out, found Running Elk, and gave him the scalp. Running Elk clutched it close, assigned a warrior to show Sam to a tipi which would be his for the night, and hurried to his own tipi to converse with the Crow scalp. Sam watched the old chief's departure with pursed lips.

Sam was in the tipi only a few moments when an old crone of a woman slipped in and let the flap of deerskin fall behind her.

She stood with lowered head, thin-bodied, her face a mass of wrinkles. She raised her face a little and when she spoke Sam glimpsed broken, yellow teeth. "I am One Who Turns Men's Heads. Strong Boy is my son. I see the way you and the girl look at each other. You must take her away, white medicine man. She is bad for Strong Boy. He pants much for her, but her father demands many ponies."

Sam studied the old woman intently. "You have not stated everything?"

"That I cannot do," she said. "Enough to say that what a man yearns for he sometimes goes to great extents to get."

"And your son does evil to gain the ponies with which to wed Singing Waters."

"I do not say as much." The old woman was uncomfortable, as if sorry now she had come. "You look at me strangely," she said. "You think perhaps I am misnamed. But many years ago I bore my name well. I could turn any man's head. My beauty could bewitch all men." Her shoulders straightened somewhat in pride, then sagged again. "But it was a curse. I wanted what I could not have. I was never happy again. Far better had I been born ugly, as age has made me now. I want my Strong Boy to be safe and happy, not as I was."

She slipped from the tipi silently as a shadow. Sam watched her shuffle across the compound. He saw the way she held her head down like a beaten cur dog, the way her people glanced aside as she passed. Some of them spat upon her shadow.

For a moment, Sam was gripped with pity for One Who Turns Men's Heads In his imagination, he saw down her years, to a time when her beauty had been a flashing thing, a smug weapon. What a reputation the old girl must have earned for herself!

SAM was prepared for the advent of a a warrior sent by Running Elk. He stood before the warrior and placed his fingertips on the Indian's chest near his heart.

"Wait," Sam ordered, "I will read what is in your heart without it coming from your lips."

He threw back his head, closed his eyes. "Running Elk has sent you to bring me to his tipi because the scalp of the Crow will not speak."

The warrior nodded dumbly.

"Running Elk is impatient, but the scalp will not speak because Running Elk is holding an innocent man prisoner. The scalp can only tell Running Elk of the fire that will sear his eyes from their sockets when he harms the wearer of the buffalo jacket, and the scalp will not speak of that for it will anger Running Elk and cause him to destroy the scalp. The scalp will speak only when it can bring good tidings to the great chief, after he has released and sent the innocent man away with gifts."

Sam pointed imperiously. "Go now to your chief and speak what I have spoken."

The warrior dashed out. Sam wiped his forehead.

He ate antelope that night from the cooking pots of the Sioux, and it was handed him by an image from a dream, light as a thistle upon her dainty feet, her face lowered but not too low for him to see the

flash of her smile. Running Elk watched him with narrowed eyes and Strong Boy with open hate.

Sam knew things were coming to a head. He could feel it in the air, sense it in the tribal council members who flanked their chief. Buffalo would either be released or put to the torture of fire to make him speak. If they decided Buffalo was guilty, then the white medicine man must be guilty as well. For an instant, the savory game almost curled in Sam's stomach.

He kept his air and attitude aloof, but his eyes and face suggested friendship when he happened to glance at Running Elk. He harbored no ill will, but Running Elk was the one who must right a wrong. Sam hoped he got this feeling across without it being misconstrued.

He strolled toward the creek with the first light of the moon. His mind was heavy with the problem. Even if Buffalo was released and they rode from the camp in safety, there remained much. The rifle-running; the impending war clouds between Crow and Sioux, which would bring troops in, lead to war, and cost white scalps and red ones as well. Sam flinched from the prospect, being a peaceable man and believing that the country needed all the good, strong citizens it had, without killing any of them off.

THEN HE SAW Singing Waters standing beside the creek, like a doe about to take flight. He walked slowly toward her. Strong Boy and I have one thing in common, he thought.

She stood warm and near in the darkness and he could hear her breathing and see the glint of teeth behind parted lips.

"You make strong medicine, Sam Tucker," she said softly. "It changes the beat of my heart and makes me dizzy here." She touched her temple.

"You are frank and honest, as a child."

"But no child. A woman worth many ponies. Can you make ponies speak, Sam?"

"Now you're laughing at me."

"I went to mission school, and I know scalps cannot talk."

"You heard the Crow scalp speak."

"And did I not say you make strong medicine?"

"Still laughing at me," he said. He caught her wrists. He pulled her toward him. She struggled enough for decorum; then their faces were almost touching.

"There is a custom among the white people which makes the strongest medicine of all," he said. "Would you like to learn its secret?"

"I think so."

He bent his head and kissed her. It was unreal, the touch of lips so soft.

She gasped. "You do speak truly. I think it's a very pleasant custom."

"A little more practice," he suggested, "and you'd be tops at it."

"Tops?"

"The best. Nothing to equal you."

"You speak with poetry. Like the singing brook." She became serious, studying his face. "And like the brook you will run away. I must go now, or like One Who Turns Men's Heads I will be made the fool."

Strong Boy came out of the shadows. His lips were peeled back until his gums showed like curdled blood about his teeth.

He hurled himself on Sam and bore Sam to the ground. Moonlight glinted on a knife. Sam grabbed the descending arm. It was strong as a hickory bough. Sam brought the arm to a halt when the knife nipped the flesh of his throat. He tried to squirm from beneath Strong Boy. The Indian gripped his throat with his other hand.

Sam grabbed the Indian's scalp. He pulled Strong Boy's head down, trying to bash it against the ground.

Dimly Sam heard shouting, Singing Waters' rising voice. Then the tramp of many feet. And Strong Boy was pulled off him.

Running Elk pushed through the warriors Singing Waters had summoned. Strong Boy writhed against the hands gripping him. "He comes to cheat us of a rascal and despoil our women!"

"Is this true, Tucker?" Running Elk asked.

"No. I come to free an innocent man, and there is only sweet music in my heart for Singing Waters."

"You will give many ponies for her?" a middle-aged Indian asked. Her father, Sam guessed.

"I will have the ponies, greedy man!" Strong Boy broke in. "Singing Waters shall be mine, and my knife will taste the blood of this offspring of a goat!"

"He has challenged you, Tucker," Running Elk said.

"He sure as hell has," Sam said glumly.

At a nod from Running Elk, Sam was herded back into the village. There was a brief council; then Running Elk gestured and warriors drew back and one took a stick to make a large circle on the ground.

STRONG BOY laughed and began stripping to his waist. Sam swallowed the cotton in his throat and did likewise.

"You will fight in the manner of our people," Running Elk commanded. Sam's hardware, including his knife, were taken from him. Strong Boy tossed his knife away and flexed his hands before him, showing silently how he would break the white neck.

Strong Boy pranced into the circle. Sam sighed and shuffled in behind the Indian. Strong Boy launched his attack as he had beside the creek, with the full force of his body.

Sam was prepared this time. He caught the Indian's arm, hit him across the back of the neck with the flat of his hand. He hit him so hard the hand went numb, and Strong Boy fell on the ground. Sam looked at him in some surprise. He felt a little better. Maybe some of the starch was knocked out of the buck now.

It did not seem so. Strong Boy backed to get his breath, grinning evilly. He returned to the attack, strong as ever, but more wary.

He circled in a crouch and feinted. The movement failed to throw Sam off guard, but it threw Strong Boy out of position. Sam put a bear hug about Strong Boy and poured all his strength into his arms. He felt the ribs giving like hickory saplings. Strong Boy screeched with pain.

They stood swaying, the flickering campfires playing over their straining, half-naked bodies, while the village watched from outside the circle.

Strong Boy brought a knee up, and Sam staggered away, reeling. Strong Boy hit him with the full force of his body and they went down. Strong Boy threw a quick scissor-hold around Sam's middle and now Sam could feel his own ribs giving under the pressure.

He grabbed and caught a moccasin. With set teeth, sweat streaming down his face, he brought the foot up and around, twisting it, eyes bugging as he stared at the foot and wondered if it were going to be pulled free. Then he saw the sole of the moccasin, and almost let go.

Strong Boy had been the rifleman who'd fled from Macklin's Branch. Sure as sin, it had to be so. Across the sole of the moccasin was an old slit, repaired with fine thong. This very moccasin had left that footprint on the bank of the branch.

The knowledge brought a new surge of strength. With a bellow, Sam brought the foot up hard. Tendons snapped. Strong Boy screeched. Sam scrambled from the reach of Strong Boy's hands and gained his feet.

The Indian tried to get up. Sam helped him, to an extent. He whirled Strong Boy around and around over his head until gasps of amazement rose from the village. Then Sam aimed Strong Boy at the hard earth and let fly. Strong Boy struck with a thud that shook the ground. The night became perfectly silent, and Sam stood gasping in the circle, the victor, with sweat and dirt caking his face and chest and fire running through his lungs as he tried to get air into them after Strong Boy's squeezing.

Sam stood tall and straight and raised his head high. He glanced at the faces about him only long enough to locate Singing Waters.

She was weeping softly, and Sam knew thanksgiving when he saw it.

HE GAVE her a wink; then his face became stony. In a thunderous voice, he spoke to Running Elk, "Disbeliever who has almost brought the wrath of the speaking scalp upon his own head, will you listen to the scalp now?"

"I will," Running Elk said.

"Then fetch the scalp. Quickly! Move not as an old woman."

One Who Turns Men's Heads ventured to her son's side, rubbed his forehead, but the ministration did not return him to consciousness.

The scalp was handed to Sam. He held it at arm's-length, began shaking it, staring at it with impassive face. The Indians' eyes all followed his stare. When every eye was focused on the shaking scalp, the tossing hair began to fling out words: "Fools, in your own midst is the traitor! It is Strong Boy who has conveyed the guns to the Crow."

A gasp, a chorus of "How can it be?" rose from the village.

"Must I tell you everything?" the scalp demanded. "Are you not wise enough to ferret out Strong Boy's motives yourselves? Perhaps he wanted money for many ponies. His own mother knew he was indulging in evil. But whatever his motive, he was with the Crow from whose head I was taken. You will find the corpse and Strong Boy's footprints near each other on Macklin Branch. Together—Crow and Sioux—they tried to kill the white medicine man, but he, in his strength, courage, and great wisdom, thwarted them and came to you with truth!"

Strong Boy was trying to stumble to his feet. His mother helped him, a wrinkled old crone standing at his side as the men of the village moved toward them, Running Elk in the van. A change took place in the old, time-destroyed features of One Who Turns Men's Heads. Her shoulders straightened. A light came to her eyes. Some of the wrinkles seemed to disappear.

She looked at the Sioux with all the venom and hate distilled through years of being despised and cast out and having her shadow spat upon.

Her voice quivered with feeling. "It was not only ponies he wanted, though that was in his mind. He is not one of you. He has never been! My husband knew and told the boy from his death bed to torture his young years. He did not cast me out, my husband, knowing the shame it would bring upon him, but he hated me and he made me what I am, old, ugly, and worked to death! Strong Boy was not his son. Strong Boy is the son of a Crow chieftain who fell under the spell of One Who Turns Men's Head when she had the beauty to bewitch all men! So great was her bewitchment that this warrior of warriors dared death to come to her side in secret meeting places. He would have made her queen of the Crow had he not died in battle.

"And now Strong Boy stands unbowed and unconquered. You will kill—but he will die as his father!"

"Wait!" The scalp began shaking again in Sam's hand. "Strong Boy must not die. He must go to the white authorities, for he could not run the guns alone. He could only act as carrier and messenger. Somewhere there are white men who supplied him, who he will name, and who deserve the punishment they shall get. Prove your honor and friendship by helping the white men find and punish the evildoers in their midst."

"Be it so ordered," Running Elk said.

SAM TUCKER and Buffalo rode away with the dawn. The trail was dim and the air cold, for in Sam's mind lingered the vision of a face and the touch of ruby warm lips. Sam ate nothing and talked little.

When they reached the wagon on Macklin Branch, Buffalo Biddix snorted. "If you're low on cash, I might loan enough to buy many ponies."

Sam looked up at him. "She will forget in time. She will find a warrior."

"I hear a jackass braying," Buffalo said.

So they drove the wagon over terrain where no wagon was meant to go. And when they reached the Sioux village, the Indians turned out to meet them with much shouting and children chasing alongside.

Sam jumped from the wagon. Running Elk stopped him with news that the scalp had stopped talking again. "It will speak to your dreams," Sam assured him, "as you sleep."

And perhaps if Running Elk carried the thought firmly enough in mind, it would be so. But Sam had little thought for Running Elk. Sam burst into a tipi and flung gold coins at a middle-aged father. "To buy many ponies," he said. "Now go buy them."

When the man went out, Sam led Singing Waters outside. She looked thinner; there were signs of weeping on her face, but her smile was radiant.

"I have come back," he stated.

"I can see," she said rather tartly.

"Say, what was your name at the mission school?"

"Beulah."

"I think I like Singing Waters better."

She linked her arm with his. "We travel in the wagon, Sam?"

"We sure do."

"It's a nice wagon. But I can't make out all the words in the big signs plastered across the side of the wagon."

"Well, the sign says: 'Magic Snake Root Oil to cure ills from lumbago to hay fever, presented by the one and only Dr. Sam Tucker, magician and ventriloquist extraordinary.' "

"What's a ventriloquist, Sam?"

"A man who can talk back to his wife without moving his lips. Now pipe down. It's about time I was showing you more of that custom we were being introduced to down on the creek when Strong Boy jumped me."

"A beautiful custom, Sam," she sighed, "of which I am eager to learn much more."

The Golden Railroad

NO OTHER RAILROAD in the world, it is said, shared the distinction belonging to the first iron trail built in the Far West, the Sacramento Valley Railroad, which ran the 23 miles between Sacramento and Folsom. It was called the Golden Railroad because its tracks were laid for the most part on a bed of rich placer gold in the Mother Lode country of California.

Stage coaches, so romantically associated with the roaring days of the early West, preceded the railroad into California by only six years. The Sacramento Valley line, begun in February, 1855, was opened exactly a year later. As construction work approached the placer diggin's of the region, around which had centered the famous gold rush of '49, grading crews uncovered the precious metal in varying quantities.

Theodore D. Judah, the young construction engineer who built the railroad, and whose monument faces the Southern Pacific's station at Sacramento, had a souvenir ring on which was engraved: "First gold ever taken from earth used in making a railroad bank."

In those days placer gold deposits were so plentiful that there is no record of anyone's having coveted the yellow metal over which the Sacramento Valley Railroad was built. Some years later, when the rails might have been moved to give way to hydraulic mining, the placer method of separating gold from the soil had become illegal; and today the tracks of the Southern Pacific, which took over the S.V. line, rest in part upon a roadbed of pay dirt.

——*Freeman H. Hubbard*

"you're just no good!"

"He stood there, tall and proud, and
the fierce, hurt look in his eyes made me cringe.
For two long years he'd kept his love for me. And I
—in one reckless, throbbing moment—had
thrown it away for an older man's passion."

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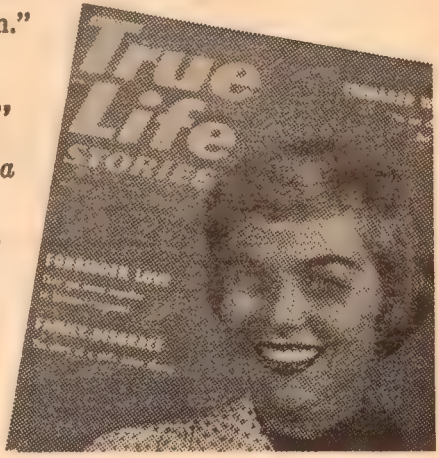

a true story of the old West

Goldfield's Little Joy

By Walker A. Tompkins

LITTLE JOY was dying. Although the brawling boomtown of Goldfield was inured to violence and bragged about having its man for breakfast and the fastest growing boothill in the Nevada desert country, the news stunned the camp.

She was only two years old, a baby girl who lived in a crumbling adobe over behind Honkytonk Row. Her mother was what a circuit-riding skypilot would brand a scarlet woman, a jezebel whose greatest sin had been bringing Little Joy into the world.

Joy had curly blonde ringlets that caught the sunlight like the wire gold which high-graders smuggled into the saloons to ex-

change for a bottle. She had been aptly named. From her cradle days, her laughter had made strange music against a background of rumbling ore wagons and clanking tipple hoists, the gunshots and profanity and squalor of a godless mining camp. Now she was burning with typhoid fever, a disease which at the turn of the century was invariably fatal to children.

Water was precious in Goldfield, since it had to be hauled in by tank wagon from Tonopah, the brawling silver camp to the north. But Little Joy's mother never lacked for enough to bathe her baby's wasted little body, using an assayer's discarded flux bin for a tub.

But finally Little Joy died, early on a hot midsummer night. The word caused gamblers to cash in their games, hurdy-gurdy houses to silence their music, shafthouses to close down their machinery. God had claimed the soul of a harlot's little daughter.

Such thoughts rode the minds of the hundreds of gun-toting, shaggy-jawed prospectors and freighters who saw Little Joy laid to rest out on the sage flats north of Goldfield, joining the nameless legion of renegades who had died with their boots on in gunfights or by lynch ropes. A carpenter had built Little Joy a coffin out of blasting-powder boxes; she was interred with her rag doll clutched in her arms. The same skypilot who had condemned Joy's mother preached the funeral oration.

Little Joy was dead, but she would never be forgotten. With her went the luck of Goldfield: from the day of her funeral, mineshafts became flooded, cave-ins occurred, veins petered out. Joy's mother found herself ostracized by the camp; somehow, Goldfield blamed her for the little one's tragic end and Goldfield's approaching oblivion.

Finally, in desperation, the hounded woman decided to return to her kinfolk back East. But she could not endure the thought of leaving her baby's grave unmarked out on the sun-baked desert.

Tombstones were impossibly expensive, and Joy's mother barely had enough money for her journey. But a million-dollar luxury hotel was being erected in Goldfield, for the day—never to dawn— when Goldfield would become the metropolis of Nevada. Tons of dressed limestone blocks were on the building site, ready for the stonemasons.

Under the Nevada stars, with no one to see her, Little Joy's mother managed to load one of the heavy stone blocks aboard a homemade wagon. No one noticed her as she began dragging her burden past the rows of false-fronted saloons, avoiding the lighted tar-barrels in front of the larger deadfalls. She was bound northwest, toward Goldfield's boothill.

She made it halfway to the graveyard before a scorching dawn overtook her. Knowing her standing in this wild community, thinking she would be branded a thief by the contractor who was building the palatial hotel, Little Joy's mother hid the wagon in a clump of creosote brush and prickly pear cactus, and trudged back to the town.

THE NEXT NIGHT she slipped away again, and this time reached Little Joy's grave with the wagon. From a saloonkeeper's toolbox, the mother had borrowed a maul and chisel. Throughout this night she bent to her task, chipping and scraping, hacking a single-word epitaph into the coarse limestone.

Finally the task was finished. A dawning sun threw the epitaph into stark relief. This block of stone would endure the suns and winds and rains of the years to follow. Maybe some day she would get back to Goldfield and be able to identify Little Joy's grave among the nameless ones.

With the full day's heat beginning to shimmer around her, the bereaved mother knelt to say farewell to her baby. Then she put the maul and chisel in the wagon and trundled it back to Goldfield. Only the barmaid who lived in the adjoining hovel knew what had been going on, and it was from her lips that Goldfield learned the source of the baby's gravestone, months after Joy's mother had left Nevada.

The following Memorial Day, miners who had bounced Little Joy on their knees

made a pilgrimage to Goldfield's cemetery, bearing wild flowers in pickle jars to adorn the grave. The Goldfield Hotel was finished by then—an imposing four-story, 400-room hostelry ornate enough for New York or London or Paris—and among its guests was a celebrated New York newspaperman. The poignant story of Little Joy reached his ears and through him was given to all America.

Goldfield's heyday was over. Little Joy's funeral marked the beginning of its decline. As mines closed up, workmen drifted away; Goldfield became a ghost town. The luxury hotel was locked up, its marble columns and gilded decorations abandoned to the spiders. Not until World War II's housing shortage was it reopened for army wives whose husbands were stationed in nearby camps.

Every Memorial Day, Little Joy's grave is freshly banked with flowers, some of them flown in at great expense from florists in New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago—gifts from Goldfield pioneers, now nearing their own end, but remembering a little girl's laughter.

Nineteen Fifty-four finds Goldfield a ghost town, its one-time population of 40,000 reduced to a handful. Its shafthouses have tumbled into ruin; floods and fires have wiped out the saloons and adobes along Honkytonk Row. Weeds have moved in on the boothill cemetery, a mile west of the Tonopah-Las Vegas highway. From it, many tourists have viewed the blinding flash and soaring mushroom smoke of atomic bombs being tested at Yucca Flat, over beyond the rugged, sterile hills to the south.

Scarcely a day goes by during the tourist season without reverent visitors coming to the abandoned cemetery on the desert to search for the mound which denotes the resting place of Little Joy. It can be identified by its tombstone, a weather-eroded block of dressed sandstone intended for the luxury hotel which still stands in Goldfield, impressive, but quite empty.

Vandals have not desecrated the stone which keeps the memory of the mining-camp baby alive. A forgotten mother carved deep the symbol of her devotion, a single word that catches the first light of each day's sunrise, a chiseled name that time and the elements cannot erase: JOY.

RANCH
FLICKER
TALK

Movie News Roundup by ROBERT CUMMINGS—Next Issue!

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A WORD-AND-PICTURE PERSONALITY SKETCH OF

AUDREY TOTTER

WHOM SHALL I MARRY?

by Professor MARCUS MARI

WOMAN OF TAURUS
APRIL 21 — MAY 20

ON MAY 10, 1869, a golden spike was driven at Ogden, Utah, marking the junction of the Central Pacific and Union Pacific railroads. Thus was the completion of the first trans-continental railway commemorated.

Taurean women secure their friendships with golden spikes! Yes, the sight of Taurus is the friendliest in the entire Zodiac, and that is the outstanding trait of the Taurean girl. With laughter and gaiety she brightens the lives of those who know her.

Here is a woman who cannot bear to see disharmony. Where there is discord, call on a Taurean girl to set it right. With her intuitive knowledge of people she can smooth over ruffled feelings and harsh tempers. With a word or a smile, past grievances are quickly forgotten.

Because of her natural talent for reconciling differences, the Taurean girl is a wonderful homemaker. Although she is warm, affectionate and sincere, she cannot always put into words emotions that are deeply felt. She tries by her acts, rather than by words, to show her feelings.

She is naturally easygoing, and her generosity is frequently imposed upon, but when she realizes it, she may lose the habit of self-control. It is well to appreciate the fact that the Taurean's anger is usually based on righteous indignation, and seldom explodes without cause.

The Taurean woman is happiest when she can be an uplifting influence without being a blatant reformer. It is with gentle humor, rather than force, that she prefers to influence those about her.

You may receive a personal reading by sending this coupon to Professor Mari in care of Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. ENCLOSE STAMPED AND SELF-ADDRESSED ENVELOPE. (Canadians enclose three cents instead of stamp.)

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Exact date of birth: Year..... Month..... Date of Month..... 5-7-54

IN THE LAST ISSUE we simply tossed our hats in the air for Bill Linderman, who is both the World Champion All-Around Cowboy and president of the RCA, and promised a full story about the awards in the next issue. So here goes.

First for the full roster of champs—and a handsome line-up it is, with one exception. Tough, leathery Ike Rude would probably consider it plumb insulting to be called handsome. Ike is the steer-roping champ of 1953, and he's also the old-timer champ—being old enough to be the father of all the other champs, and of most of the cowboys in rodeo, for that matter.

The team roping winner is Ben Johnson, who certainly can't object to being called handsome, since he's a movie actor as well as a top-hand.

In the five more regularly scheduled rodeo events, all the title holders finished among the top ten in the All-Around standings for the year, winning points in other events besides their specialty.

Casey Tibbs won the saddle bronc title, and gave Bill Linderman a real fight for the All-Around. His total was 31,207 points, (i.e dollars won in 1953) of which about 22,500 were won in the saddle, 7,600 in bareback and 1,000 in bull-riding.

Third in the All-Around race was Ross Dollarhide, whom you might call a five-letter man. He won points in saddle bronc, calf-roping, team roping and steer roping—as well as in bulldogging, of which he's the champ. His total was over 28,000, of which 14,224 came from his battles with the big Brahmas.

Eddy Akridge won the bareback crown with a total score of 17,302, and he came in fifth for All-Around by adding another 3,500 points in bull-riding and saddle bronc.

In the bull-riding event Todd Whatley took the honors with 13,146 points, and he added another 5,000 by competing in bareback bronc-riding and bulldogging, putting him eighth in All-Around.

Don McLaughlin is the best calf-roper in the RCA, and he's proved it for the third year in succession. He won 15,902 points with his lariat and piggin' string and added another 1,000 or so in other roping events, to finish in 9th place for the All-Around.

The grand champ is, of course, Bill Linderman, with his gross income from rodeo of $33,674. There has seldom been an All-Around Champion who hasn't come out on top in one of the major events, but Bill turned the trick this year. It seems to prove that it's not such a bad thing to be a jack-of-all-trades in rodeo. He has actually competed in every one of the seven rodeo events for which championships are awarded, and he has often distinguished himself as a wild-cow milker and wild-horse racer, as well.

BILL was born 34 years ago in Bridger, Mont., and grew up on ranches, planning to be a rodeo cowboy, dreaming of being a great star but never realizing the tremendous influence he would have on his favorite sport.

He is the first cowboy to be All-Around Champion three times (1945, 1950, 1953), and he is just starting his third term as president of the RCA. Originally he was appointed to finish the term of Toots Mansfield, who resigned in mid-year. In the next election, Bill got 56 per cent of the votes, and this year he won by a landslide 63 per cent.

Bill is uniquely fitted for this job—a job which most cowboys wouldn't touch with a ten-foot pole. It means a lot of traveling,

and cowboys get plenty of that just going to rodeos. It means long hours of negotiation with producers, and other long hours of listening to the gripes of RCA members. The only pay is the thanks of the membership. Bill, in fact, has to pay all his own traveling expenses except the trip to the yearly Denver convention.

We said Bill is well suited to this difficult, patience-trying job. It's because he is both a good businessman and a typical cowboy. He is a diplomat—though it's difficult to picture him in striped pants—who can keep quiet when he ought to and speak up when he has something to say. He's not shy with the important people who are sometimes honored guests at rodeos, and yet when he's with his fellow contestants he is really one of them.

They feel he's shrewd when he represents them, but not when he's one of them. In other words, he can be slick and sharp in behalf of the whole membership, but never for himself alone.

Bill thinks his most valuable asset (and the one he takes the most pride in) is his reputation for fairness. He understands from personal experience the cowboy's side of a question, but he's intelligent enough and objective enough to see the producer's side too.

DURING the meetings in Denver, the RCA directors (one for each event) and Bill met every day for nine days, and sometimes didn't adjourn until late at night. The problems they had to consider covered nearly every phase of rodeo.

There was the matter of RCA approval for nearly 600 rodeos next year. Most of the okays were routine—the producers offered obviously fair prize lists and co-operated with the RCA in every way. But there were some 150 rodeos about which the directors had some question—mostly on whether the purses were big enough.

There was the matter of the insurance coverage which the RCA furnishes for its membership—$20 out of the $25 in dues goes for premiums. The committee had to consider safety rules, and discuss the suggestion that prize money be split six ways instead of four. They set up a formula for TV coverage, worrying about whether widespread televising of rodeos wouldn't cut into the gate.

And finally there were the disputes—arguments between top-hands and producers mostly, in which one party felt wronged by the other and left it up to the RCA to decide who was right.

The RCA is campaigning to have rodeo recognized as a sport, but there is no denying that it is also big business. Accurate figures are impossible to compile, but it is estimated that 20 million people saw rodeos last year.

In 1954 rodeo producers will pay out a million and a half dollars to winning cowboys, and added to that there will be nearly a million dollars in entry fees. Just the paper work connected with approving rodeos and keeping score costs the RCA over $25,000 a year. In the middle '40's the RCA was a one-room office in Ft. Worth, Tex. Now in Denver, the headquarters keeps expanding at the rate of a room a year.

And at the head of it all is a quiet, handsome 6-footer who carries this responsibility well, and at the same time manages to compete in 40 rodeos during the year and win a good many of them.

What's more he's a good husband and father, too—we've never heard his wife, Pat, or his three children complain. His twin daughters are now nine, and his little boy is three, and all of them love to go on the circuit with Daddy. The rest of the time they live on a ranch in Montana, or in a home Bill just bought near Walla Walla, Wash.

One thing about Bill is that luck hasn't played much part in his success. He's done it all himself, with brains and brawn and energy. You can't accuse a fellow of having much luck when you consider his list of injuries: a broken neck, finger, leg, back and a fractured skull. A fellow who can pull through all those calamities is obviously a fellow who can't be stopped.

The RCA is lucky to have him—and the RCA knows it.

Adios,

THE EDITORS

Brand of Fury

By Jack Barton

He was safe now, except for the bullet wound . . .

PART TWO

RAGLAN was kneed in the face by Leach as he went down, and booted to the body as he lay helpless on the floor. He lost the derringer and was too dazed to make use of his own gun. He sprawled there, face down, full of splintering pain; then after a long moment he forced himself to rise. They permitted him to gain his feet before closing in again.

He tried to defend himself, and struck clumsy blows. He managed to send one wild punch solidly to Lefty Greer's face, but the next instant he was clouted heavily by Leach, stunned into paralysis, and they battered him at will until he collapsed. He struggled to rise again, but Greer said, "Damn, but he's a tough customer!" and booted him once more, this time to the side of the head.

He was barely conscious now, and they dragged him, each taking an arm, from the saloon. They dumped him into the mud of the street, and two riders coming along through the rainy dark at a lope pulled up short to keep from trampling him.

He heard Jake Leach say, "He's your kind. Maybe you want to look after him."

The riders, the Mallory brothers, were not too eager, but finally one dismounted and helped him to his feet. There was some discussion between the two, then one said, "He and McDade are friendly. Let's take him there."

They took him to McDade and left him with the saloonman, who was just closing up for the night. He sat in a chair, holding his head in his hands and dripping blood onto the floor. McDade brought a basin of water, some cloths, and a bottle of whisky. He washed Raglan's face clean of mud, sweat and blood, then swabbed a nasty gash at his left temple with a cloth saturated with whisky. The burning sting of the alcohol was nothing compared to the pain Raglan suffered. McDade gave him a stiff drink to ease that. The bleeding finally stopped and the pain eased.

McDade said, "What's going on, Ed?"

Raglan told him, his voice hoarse with the anger in him. The saloonman shook his head and said, "It's a hell of a thing. Spend the night here. I'll loan you a blanket and you can bed down in a back room. You're in no shape to go elsewhere."

Raglan said, "Thanks."

It would be all he could do, the way he felt, to walk to a back room. . . .

In the morning his face was a mass of bruises. He had a black eye, a cut over his right cheekbone, the gash at his left temple, a badly swollen jaw. His head ached, and he had sore spots everywhere.

McDade had been up an hour ahead of him and taken Raglan's levis and ducking jacket outside to brush the dried mud off them. Raglan's clothes looked fairly respectable again, if he did not. McDade had also prepared breakfast—and he had news.

"I talked with Cleve Arnold, at the livery," he said. "He said Harnish took his horse out early this morning and left town with a couple Tomahawk hands. It looks as though that outfit is taking no chances on your catching that hombre alone."

"So he went to Tomahawk with them, eh?"

"Seems likely."

"Well, that's the one place he's safe," Raglan said. "I'm not such a fool that I'd go there after him."

"What are you planning to do, Ed?"

"Play a waiting game, I suppose. Harnish won't stay at Tomahawk forever. And when he shows himself outside, I'll get hold of him."

McDade frowned. "Why not do the sensible thing?" he said. "Take your beating, admit that you're licked, and clear out. You can't fight Matt Dane and his Tomahawk crew."

THE STORY SO FAR:

ED RAGLAN, 77 ramrod, finds WILL VANCE changing a 77 brand into Ladder A. He knows that his one-time close friend, now successful rancher FRANK AMBERTON, Ladder A owner, has finally gone too far. But friendship prods him to warn Amberton when they meet at MATTHEW DANE's Tomahawk. Amberton disclaims responsibility for what Will Vance does, though Vance is working for him.

LAURIE DANE, now home from the East, where her father had sent her when he suspected a romance between her and Raglan, asks Raglan to warn two-bit rancher BART SOMERS that the vigilantes are after him for rustling. To do this for her, Raglan asks the aid of SAM MALLORY. He meets CHRISTINE, Sam's daughter, and is turned down coldly when he asks if he may call on her. When Raglan returns to the 77 his boss, LYLE CREIGHTON, fires him with regret, saying that LEW HARNISH, Cattlemen's Association lawyer, has accused Raglan himself of brand-blotching. Knowing he's been framed, Raglan goes to town to settle with Harnish. . . .

"You're wrong, Mac," Raglan said. "I can't win, maybe, but I sure as hell can fight. Nobody's getting away with branding me a rustler, and nobody's driving me off this range."

"Where are you going from here?"

"To my old cow camp on Squaw Creek," Raglan said. "I've got no place else to go."

THE MORNING was crystal clear. The sun, already high, was baking the mud of Bennett's main street hard and dry. Raglan went first to the Stockmen's Bar to retrieve the hat and slicker he'd lost during his fight with the Tomahawk men. The door stood open to the sunlight, and a swamper, a seedy old man, was sweeping the floor in a half-hearted fashion. The hat and slicker lay on a table. Raglan reshaped and donned the hat, slung the slicker over his shoulder. Leaving the saloon, he stopped on the street to roll and light a cigarette. He stood thinking for a moment, then headed for the Star Corral.

It was high noon when he left Bennett, riding his dun gelding and leading a little roan he'd bought from Cleve Arnold. The roan was rigged with a pack-saddle and carrying a full load of provisions and gear. He kept on the move all afternoon and until nearly nightfall, then camped at a nameless little creek near the edge of the rough country at the far north end of Tulare Basin. . . .

He reached the Squaw late the following morning. This was broken country, a vast sweep of it separated by a range of craggy hills from the rolling prairie land that made up the main portion of the basin. Squaw Creek was a wanton little stream, fast-flowing in a narrow channel toward the depths of a gorge of the same name. Squaw Gorge was not, and could never be, cattle range. But there were other canyons and numerous small valleys where there was good graze. However, here in the badlands, grass was where a cow found it—and most of the stretch consisted of rock fields, and sand flats, and eroded buttes. It was the sort of country from which most cattlemen shied, and Raglan alone had run stock here. In the past he had explored it to its far corners, and he knew what no other man in Tulare Basin suspected—that it would permit the grazing of a large number of cattle. But he, of course, had held only a couple hundred head in his brand.

Riding through a V-shaped notch in the rock hills, he swung toward his buildings and now had an occasional glimpse of cattle in the brush. They were wilder than the stock on the main Basin range, and fled at the sight or scent of him. That was due to the total absence of riders here, he knew. Or at least, so he hoped. It was possible, despite the scramble after mavericks, that no riders had worked this back country. In that case, he would be the owner of a considerable herd. The calf crop of even a couple hundred head for two years was no small thing, and it would be wise, he told himself, to burn his RAG onto the unbranded critters as soon as he could.

His buildings were located between the creek and a pine-studded slope, and within half a mile of the entrance to the forbidding Squaw Gorge. Seeing them now, for the first time in two years, he felt confused emotions. The one-room cabin and small log barn were in a state of disrepair that depressed him; at the same time he experienced a pride of ownership. His pride curdled somewhat by the realization that he had homesteaded in a section where no other men cared to settle. He rode into the grass- and weed-grown yard, the loneliness of the place stealing over him.

The roofs of both buildings needed repairs; that of the barn sagged perilously. The cabin door hung by only one hinge. A portion of the corral fence was down. He dismounted, pushed the door open with care. A squirrel scampered past him in sudden flight. The interior of the cabin was as he'd left it, except for a heavy film of dust. There was a stone fireplace at one end of the room, his bunk at the other. In the center was a plank table with a bench at either side of it. The lantern he used as a lamp stood neatly in the center of the table. Except for a cupboard, there was nothing more. It was a crude shelter, not a real home. Still, he would repair it—and this time he would not think of it as a mere cow camp, but as his ranch headquarters.

He would put down roots, this time.

He moved his provisions and gear inside, then staked out his horses. He built a fire from kindling stacked beside the fireplace, and cooked a meal of bacon, beans, biscuits and coffee. After eating he went to the barn seeking a couple bundles of shake shingles that had been left from when he put up the buildings. He spent the afternoon repairing the cabin roof, finished up at sundown by rehanging the door. There was some satisfaction in a man's working for himself, he told himself. And even in cooking his own meals.

But soon after he'd eaten supper, he went to bed to ward off loneliness.

HE WAS RESTLESS in the morning, and reluctant to start work on the barn and the corral fence. He saddled the dun and rode out across the range. He spotted more cattle than he'd expected; indeed, they were in such numbers that he was pleasantly surprised. He no longer needed to wonder whether or not mavericker had worked over this part of the basin. They had not. And there were more mavericks here than could be credited to his own small herd. He understood what had happened. Cattle from the main part of Tulare Basin had drifted into the Squaw Creek country—cattle in the 77 iron, the Tomahawk, the Ladder A, others. These cattle had dropped calves; the calves had gone unbranded and, after weaned, taken on the status of mavericks. He did not need to debate the matter. He was looking out for Ed Raglan from now on, and every maverick he found was going into his RAG brand. . . .

He made the repairs to his barn and fixed the corral fence, then went mavericking. It was hard work, almost too hard for one man. He had to tend the fire, see that his iron was hot. He had to hunt, chase, rope, drag, bulldog and hogtie every critter he put into his brand. But he kept at it day after day, without rest. He was building himself a herd, making himself into a sure-enough cowman.

He burned his RAG on thirteen slicks the first day, twenty-one the second. At the end of a week, he had increased his herd by one hundred twelve head. As he had expected, he spotted numerous cattle in outside brands. These he did not approach.

He would do no brand-blotching. He was not even tempted.

The mavericks grew scarce close to his headquarters and he was forced to work farther out on the range each day. In time, he knew, he would have to set up a camp at the far end of the hardscrabble range. He wouldn't be able to ride out and back each day and still have time or energy to do much mavericking.

However, he was still operating from headquarters the second week, and one sundown came in to see smoke rising from his cabin chimney.

Bart Somers was lounging in the doorway. He'd made himself at home. He'd off-saddled his horse and put it in the corral. He had a tin cup of coffee in his hand. He gave Raglan one of his happy-go-lucky grins.

"For a man who's gone back to being his own boss, you put in a long day," he said. "Doing some mavericking?"

"A little."

"I made a pot of coffee. Hope you don't mind."

"I don't. But you could have rustled up supper for the two of us."

"I'll do just that, if you're not afraid of my cooking."

Raglan said, "It can't be any worse than mine," and turned to the corral to put up his horse. When he entered the cabin, Somers was busy at the fireplace. He made himself comfortable on his bunk, built a smoke, finding it good not to have to fix his own grub after a hard day's work. It occurred to him that he had money enough to hire Bart Somers for a month or so, and the two of them could finish up the mavericking in that time. It would be easier on him, and it would be pleasant to have company. Somers was a top-hand, and likeable as well. But he reminded himself that the man was a suspected rustler—and he was sure in his own mind that Somers was that. He couldn't afford to hire a known thief if

he still intended to clear his own name.

He rested until Somers had the meal on the table. They ate with lusty appetites and no talk. Nothing was said until they had finished their coffee and lighted cigarettes.

Then Somers said, "Stopped by to say thanks, Ed, for that message you got to me. I heeded the warning. I've been hiding out since." He chuckled. "Taking a vacation." Then, soberly: "A lady sent it? Laurie Dane?"

"That's right."

"I'll have to thank her, too."

Raglan said, "How'd you know I was here?"

"Word got around that you'd moved back to your old place on the Squaw," Somers said. "Some of the Hatchet Hills boys heard it from McDade in town. Been a lot of talk about you losing your job and having a run-in with a couple of Tomahawk riders. The talk is that you're anxious to get hold of a hombre named Lew Harnish."

"That's right."

"I hear that Harnish left Tomahawk and is snooping around for the Association. McDade wanted you to know that. Harnish is in and out of Bennett all the time."

Raglan's face hardened. "That's news I wanted to hear. I'll make a trip to town."

Somers rose, picked up his hat. "I'll leave you to do the dishes, bucko. I've got a long ride ahead of me tonight. Got to get to Tomahawk by midnight."

"Tomahawk? You crazy, man?"

"A man's crazy for wanting to see Laurie Dane?"

"Sure, if she's bad medicine for him. Bart, your name is still on the Vigilante list. You forgetting that?"

"I won't be taking too many chances," Somers said. "I sent word to Laurie, in a roundabout way, that I'd meet her tomorrow at the old horse camp near Drum Lake." He grinned, and poked Raglan in the side with a forefinger. "She used to meet me there sometimes when I was working at Tomahawk. I'll get there under cover of darkness, and Matt Dane and his tough-hands will never know I was around."

He went out, and Raglan watched from the doorway as he roped and saddled his horse. When mounted, he swung over to the cabin.

"I'd rather be hunting my kind of game than yours," he said. "Harnish can't be half as pretty as that Laurie. Be seeing you, Ed."

Raglan had to marvel at Bart Somers. The man actually went hunting trouble.

RAGLAN got duded up the next morning. He took a bath in the chill waters of Squaw Creek, scrubbing himself with yellow soap. He shaved and slicked down his hair. He put on his town clothes: the gray broadcloth, a white shirt, a maroon string tie, his good boots, and his spare hat. He saddled the dun and headed for Bennett.

He took it easy, since the gelding had been worked hard at mavericking, and it was growing dark when he reached town. He put the horse up at the Star Corral, then had supper at the Welcome Café. After his meal, he went to McDade's Saloon.

It was a Saturday night, and all Bennett's business places were open and busy. McDade's was fairly crowded, his patrons as usual two-bit cattlemen and men like Bart Somers who had no visible means of earning a livelihood. Sam Mallory and his two sons sat at a table with old J. C. Pierce, one of their neighbors. Raglan went to the bar and bought a bottle of whisky.

As he made change, McDade said, "You get the word about Harnish, Ed?"

"Yeah. That's what brought me to town. Thanks for passing it along, Mac."

"Watch your step, bucko."

"Sure," Raglan said, and carried bottle and glass to the Mallorys' table. "Evening, gents. Mind if I join you?"

They hadn't been doing any heavy drinking, no doubt because they were short of cash, as usual. He poured a drink for himself, then set the bottle in the center of the table. The whisky, if nothing else, would make him welcome.

"Help yourselves."

Sam Mallory said, "Thanks," and poured for himself and the others. He lifted his glass. "Here's looking at you, friend."

They drank together, and Mallory immediately refilled the glasses all around.

He said, "There's talk that you're back to ranching up at Squaw Creek. Any truth to it?"

"It's true."

Old Pierce said, "Mighty poor range, that." He ranched at Red Butte, running his cattle in a small valley rich in graze. He was far better located than any other of the Hatchet Hills cattlemen. "You'll be raising cattle all hide and bones."

Raglan smiled. "Still, it's better than no range at all." He looked at the Mallory brothers. "I should say thanks for your picking me up out of the mud that night."

One said, "Steve was the one who did the picking up."

The other said, "Stick to the truth, Russ. Picking him up was your idea."

Raglan regarded them with amusement. He might be a raggedy-pants cowman again, but these two weren't forgetting that he had once been a big-outfit man. He wondered why they'd bothered to help him that night the Tomahawk men had dragged him from the Stockmen's Bar. He recalled suddenly that he had promised their sister that he would come calling on her. The promise had been forgotten in the upheavel that had taken place in his life. Indeed, he had given Christine no thought since losing his job and re-establishing himself at Squaw Creek. It occurred to him that he had let himself be the victim of loneliness when there was a cure within reach. On the other hand, the girl had tried to discourage him and he had a hunch that she, like Russ and Steve, wouldn't have forgotten that he had once worked for one of the big outfits.

Russ said, "Did Bart Somers stop by your place?"

Raglan nodded. "Last night."

"Did the crazy galoot go on to Tomahawk?"

"He said something about going there."

"He'll get his head blowed off or put his neck in a noose," Russ said. "Risking his life like that, just to see a girl."

"Well, it's his life," Raglan said, rising. "And she's quite a girl."

He left the bottle for them to finish, walking from the saloon. He halted outside to roll and light a cigarette, watching the activity along the main street. Like all cowtowns, Bennett took on a holiday air on Saturdays. People came in from all parts of the basin. There were even dirt-farmers from Aspen Meadows, outside the Basin. These men brought their wives and children, and few of them frequented the drinking places. The stores and shops attracted them, and often they'd gather in groups to talk before one or another of the business places. The street was lined on both sides with all manner of rigs and with saddle horses.

Len Hibner came along. He was the law in Tulare Basin, a deputy sheriff sent out from the county seat. He collected taxes and went through the motions of keeping law and order. But he was an inadequate little man, apologetic of manner rather than aggressive as a lawman needed to be.

Raglan said, "Len, you seen Lew Harnish around?"

Hibner stopped. "I saw him over at the Stockmen's, about an hour ago." He regarded Raglan uneasily. "Look, Ed; I heard about you and Harnish having trouble some time ago. You're not aiming to start it up again, are you?"

"I just want a few words with him."

"Well, don't start anything."

"I won't," Raglan said, and headed for the Stockmen's Bar.

HE PASSED Tip Nolan and another 77 cowhand outside the saloon, nodding to them and getting flat stares in return. The Stockmen's was crowded and noisy, and he halted just inside the doorway to look for Harnish. The range detective was not at the bar, at any of the tables, or among the men shooting pool at the rear of the long room. Several men well known to Raglan glanced his way, but, like the two 77 men, failed to acknowledge his nod. This silent treatment got under his skin. He turned to leave, and was stopped by a voice that bellowed, "You there, Raglan!"

He faced about, saw Jake Leach shove away from the bar and come toward him on

the rubbery legs of a drunk. The man's shout had reached to every corner of the place, causing an abrupt diminishing of noise and activity. Aware that he and Raglan were now the center of attraction, Leach grinned like a show-off kid. He halted directly before Raglan, thumbs hooked in his gunbelt.

"Rustler, don't you ever learn?" he said. "I told you before this place is reserved for honest men."

"I learn, Jake. At least, I've learned one thing lately. That somebody—maybe your boss—can use a running-iron to frame a man."

"So you were framed, were you? And Matthew Dane did the framing?"

"That's what I think, Jake."

"And you're innocent as a new-born babe, eh?"

"I never stole a cow in my life," Raglan said. "The man who says I did is a liar."

He saw, over Leach's shoulder, that Hank Mockridge was enjoying this. Tomahawk's affairs were not Mockridge's concern, but now, as Leach hesitated about playing out his hand, the Double M man nudged Lefty Greer.

Greer called, "You letting him talk like that about the boss, Jake?"

That put it directly up to Leach, who said, "Not me, damn it!"

He lunged forward, striking clumsy blows.

Raglan's mind had been made up; he wouldn't be caught off guard as he had been on his last visit to the Stockmen's Bar. He blocked and ducked Leach's wild punches, then drove a right to the man's chin. He felt the impact all the way to the soles of his feet. As for Jake Leach, he reacted as though clouted by a heavy club. His head rocked far back, and for a moment he teetered off balance. Then his knees gave way and he pitched forward. Raglan hit him twice more, as he went down, once between the eyes and once at the base of the skull. Then Leach was sprawled on the floor, face down. Raglan had his gun out and cocked before drawing another breath, aiming it at Lefty Greer. He surprised the Tomahawk man with his weapon half-drawn.

"Be smart, Lefty!"

The warning slapped at Greer, rattled him. He froze, his gun still not clear of leather. He remained like that for a moment, then swore and let the gun slip back into its holster.

Raglan said, "Keep on being smart, Lefty," and backed through the doorway.

Once outside, he turned quickly to the corner of the building. He faced about at the entrance to the dark alleyway between the saloon and the neighboring building. As he had anticipated, Greer came running to the street with his gun in his hand.

Tip Nolan and the other 77 puncher stood before the saloon, and Greer yelled at them, his voice shrill with excitement: "Raglan! Where'd he get to?"

Nolan gestured toward the alley, then he and his companion moved hastily out of the probable line of fire. Greer whirled, seeking Raglan. Still hoping to avoid gunplay, Raglan called, "Don't be a fool, Lefty!" The blast of the gun came as he spoke, and he heard the slug strike the plank wall beside him. He hesitated no longer, but fired as Greer readied another shot. An incoherent cry ripped from the throat of Greer. He dropped his gun, clapped his right hand to his shoulder, stood swaying for a moment, then sank to his knees.

Raglan holstered his gun and turned away. Behind him, the wounded Tomahawk man lifted his voice in a shout: "Tomahawk! Tomahawk!"

Other voices took it up here and there along the busy street: "Tomahawk! Tomahawk!" It was a war cry. Men came running from several directions, aiming for the Stockmen's Bar. Lefty Greer was yelling now, "Get Raglan! Get Ed Raglan!"

Raglan started to run.

THERE was much confused yelling behind him, then a gun threw a flat blast of sound along the street. A homesteader woman shrieked at her children to come to her, and a man swore in an outraged tone. Raglan too swore, cursing the stupidity of the Tomahawk man who had fired that shot. It could have hit some innocent bystander; certainly, it had not come

anywhere near him, the target. He ducked past people scampering for cover; then heard a shout, "There he is!" On that he turned into Leyton's general store. He strode past customers and clerks, through the maze of merchandise, and located the back door.

He plunged into the darkness at the rear, angled toward the dark bulk of a barn. He was ten feet short of it when two men came running around the corner of the Leyton building. He swung around, drew his gun, and fired at them. They scurried back the way they had come, and Raglan, knowing the barn was no longer a sanctuary, darted into the wagon yard of the Acme Freighting Company. The pair he'd scared off were yelling for help, so he worked his way through the dozen or so big freight rigs in the yard. He circled Acme's corral, sprinted across a vacant lot, came to the Barton Bros. lumber yard. He heard more yells, and pounding boots. But he was winded, and so stopped to catch his breath. He leaned against a high stack of lumber, and in a minute or two a gun blasted at a distance, at the far side of town, and the shot drew the nearby men away. He had a brief respite.

He knew now, if he hadn't before, that McDade was right. The saloonman had said he couldn't fight Tomahawk, and he couldn't. He could only run. He'd come to find Harnish in the hope of finding a way to clear himself of the rustler charge, and he would be lucky to escape with his life. He remained there until it seemed likely that the Tomahawk hands had learned that the shot had not been fired at him. He moved past a row of houses, saying, "Quiet, boy—quiet!" to a small dog that started up a ferocious barking.

He reached the tangle of corrals behind the livery stable, moved along them to the side of the squat, sprawling plank building. A moment later, he turned the corner of the stable to its front. Laurie Dane was standing just outside the wide doorway, peering toward the center of town. She gave him a startled look.

"Ed, is it you the Tomahawk hands are hunting?"

He nodded jerkily, continuing toward the doorway.

Laurie cried, "Don't go in there, Ed!"

He halted, his back to the stable wall. "Some of them inside, Laurie?"

"My father."

"He knows they're gunning for me?"

"I don't know. I came here a few minutes ahead of him. But if he knows—"

Two men came from the building, one the hostler with Laurie's horse and the other Matthew Dane with his own mount. They saw the anxious look on the girl's face in the glow of lantern light from inside the entrance, and now turned in the direction she was staring. Dane uttered an incoherent grunt upon seeing Raglan; then, noticing the drawn gun, he said, "What's this, Raglan—an attempt on my life?"

Raglan was shaken by anger and hatred. He had his gun beading the man he believed responsible for all his troubles, and a slight pressure of a finger would rid him of that man. For one wild moment, he came close to firing a shot into Dane's bulky body. Then he knew something about himself: no matter how much he hated, he couldn't kill in cold blood.

He heard a commotion along the street and glanced toward it. A group of men—some afoot and some mounted—were headed his way. He knew he wouldn't be able to get his own horse, but he had to have a mount if he was to stay alive. He moved in on Matthew Dane, jerked the man's gun from its holster. He threw the weapon onto the stable roof, then jerked the reins of Dane's horse from the man's hand. He swung to the saddle.

Laurie cried, "Hurry, Ed—hurry!"

He wheeled the horse, a fine sorrel gelding, away from the stable. He raked it with his spurs, put it into a hard run away from the town.

A shout lifted, "That's him!"

The mounted Tomahawk hands came after him.

HE KEPT the sorrel on the road until he saw the bridge across Rock Creek. He swung off it then, and aimed for a clump of trees along the creek bank. He

reined in among the trees and dropped from the saddle. A moment later the Tomahawk riders loomed through the darkness. They racketed across the plank bridge and raced on along the road.

Raglan waited, and shortly a second bunch came tearing along from town. He had a bad moment when they slowed their mounts at the approach to the bridge. But they did not stop, and when they too were swallowed up by the darkness, he mounted and headed the sorrel upstream. After half a mile, he left the creek and rode east until he was once more at the edge of town—but well away from the road entering it. He reined in, debated his next move.

He decided that he wanted his own horse, and the rifle on its saddle. With the Tomahawk riders between him and Squaw Creek, he wanted to be well armed and mounted on a horse he knew and could depend upon in a pinch. After a few minutes, he walked the sorrel in toward the Star Corral. He dismounted at the side of the building and led the animal. He took a furtive look from the front corner. Matthew Dane and his daughter were gone; only the hostler was in sight, and he was busy hitching up a pair of matched grays to a buckboard.

He headed toward the stable door, and said flatly, when the hostler glanced at him, "Mind your business, friend. And keep your mouth shut."

The man gave him a frightened look, a jerky nod.

He took the sorrel inside, dropped its reins. He went back the runway to the stall in which his dun had been placed. He saddled it in a hurry, backed it from the stall, mounted and rode from the stable. The hostler had finished with the grays.

Raglan said, "That's Frank Amberton's rig?"

"Yeah."

"Where's Amberton?"

"Still in town. He sent a kid out to tell me to hitch up his team."

Raglan nodded, turned away. He headed out the west road, but, when beyond the hostler's sight, he turned north across the grass flats to avoid the Tomahawk riders. He wanted to have a talk with Frank Amberton. It was time he asked a favor of his friend. If Frank still is my friend, he thought bleakly. . . .

He waited in a clump of trees beside the north road, which led to Ladder A Ranch, and finally heard a wagon and team coming along through the darkness. When he was sure that it was the Amberton rig, he sang out, "Frank, pull up!"

Amberton stopped his fast-stepping grays. "Ed, is that you?"

Raglan said, "It's me." His voice sounded sour even to his own ears. He rode from the trees, came alongside the buckboard. Clara was with Amberton, and had no greeting for Raglan. He knew that whatever friendliness she had felt for him had curdled the night he visited Ladder A.

Amberton said, "Ed, are you out of your mind? You shouldn't be hanging around here with Tomahawk gunning for you. You can't fight that outfit."

"I know I can't," Raglan said. "I didn't start the fight. Every time I show up in town, Jake Leach jumps me—and, by hell, I'll defend myself. That whole bunch is too eager to kill me. First Matt Dane framed me, and now, because he's worried that I'll prove that, he's got his hands gunning for me. He's scared to death that I'll catch up with Harnish, and that's just what I aim to do. Frank, I'm asking you to help me."

"How, Ed? What can I do?"

"You know how I was framed?"

AMBERTON nodded. "Clara told me about it when I got back from Cheyenne. I rode over to Tomahawk to ask Matt about it. He said Harnish brought in a cow with its Tomahawk brand burned over into your RAG."

"That's all he said?"

"What else would he say?"

"I thought he might have mentioned who pointed out that brand-blotched steer to Harnish."

"He didn't mention that."

"He wouldn't," Raglan said. "My idea is that he had one of his hands do the brand-blotching, then turns the steer over to Harnish as evidence against me. It could be that Harnish was in on the frame-up.

Anyway, I want to find out who counterfeited my RAG. Frank, I'm asking you to ask Harnish who it was."

"I can ask, but will he tell me?"

"He claimed he reported the whole business to the Tulare Basin Cattlemen's Association. If he did, you can see that report—and get the man's name. You're an Association member."

Amberton took out a cigar and lighted it. In the glow of the match, his face was frowning. Raglan could see no friendliness in him.

Raglan said, "Well, Frank?"

The match flame flickered out. Amberton said, "I'll try to get it, Ed."

Raglan said, with a sudden flare of temper, "Maybe you'd better do more than try, Frank. Maybe you'd better get me the man's name—not just try. Once I have it, I'm going to catch him and force him to admit he counterfeited my brand on that steer. Then I'm going to let the whole Basin know what kind of a no-good Matt Dane really is. Get it, Frank. Bring it to me at my place on Squaw Creek. You savvy?"

"Ed, that's pretty rough talk. You can't threaten me."

"I can't?"

"I'm willing to do you a favor, but when you order me around—"

Clara had been silent all this while, but now she said, "You're not being very bright, Frank. It's clear enough, what he means. If you don't do what he wants, he'll let it out that you're the man he shielded in that Will Vance business." She gave Raglan a spiteful look. "That's it, isn't it?"

Raglan said, "That's right." His voice was bitter. "A couple of old friends should stick by each other, Frank. I should cover up the fact that you're a thief, and you should help me prove that I'm not one. I'll expect you to come visit me at Squaw Creek one of these days."

He left them abruptly, riding west through the night.

He'd made the threat, but he knew that it wasn't in him to reveal that Frank had been rustling. He hoped Frank didn't know it, however. For at the moment it seemed that only with Frank's help could he clear himself. And, yes, show up Matthew Dane for what he really was.

MORE OFTEN than not, the hour before dawn is the darkest of the night. So it was when Raglan reached his place on the Squaw. He had neither seen nor heard other riders along the way, and he didn't know whether or not the Tomahawk men had ventured this far in their search for him. He was cautious, riding in. He circled the buildings, gun in hand. And then, certain that nobody was there, he got his bedding from the cabin and rode to the timbered slope behind the place. Midway up, deep within the pines, he off-saddled and staked off his horse. He spread his blankets and lay down to a restless sleep.

At midmorning, he rose and studied his buildings and the surrounding range. Seeing no riders, he saddled the dun and rode down from the slope. He watered the horse, then left it ground-hitched on a patch of grass beside the cabin. He went inside, built a fire, cooked breakfast. He ate without much appetite, and afterwards, while smoking his first cigarette of the day, he became acutely aware of his loneliness.

Toward noon, he mounted and headed toward the entrance to Squaw Gorge. There was one person who might end his feeling of aloneness—Christine Mallory.

He had been through the gorge before, and so far as he knew, he was the only man who ever did venture down into the forbidding depths. The waters of the creek tumbled into the canyon over a series of falls. A thunderous roar rose from it, and the air was filled with a spray which in the sunlight had the colors of a rainbow. At first glance there appeared to be no footing for a horse, and Raglan's dun tried to shy away from the descent. He dismounted and led it downward, picking his way over a series of switchbacks along the rocky wall. The horse was wall-eyed with fright.

Even when he reached the canyon floor, Raglan found the going only slightly less difficult. He had to work his way through a maze of boulders and rock formations,

but after perhaps half a mile the gorge widened somewhat and there were fewer barriers. When it was perhaps fifty feet between the towering walls, with more space ahead, he got back into the saddle. It was a foolhardy trip to make, but the gorge was a challenge to him. He took an odd pleasure in knowing that he dared go where other men wouldn't venture. Also, it was a short cut into the Hatchet Hills and saved him many miles on the way to the Mallory ranch.

Midway through, the south wall bowed sharply. Between it and the creek was a bench of grass, brush and a few scrub trees, and here the voice of the Squaw was hardly more than a murmur. Its channel widened greatly, forming a sizable pool. This was the only pleasant spot in the entire six miles of the gorge.

Beyond, the walls pressed together again and the going grew rough until at the far end there was another treacherous climb to the high rim. When he came from the depths, again leading his horse, he felt as though he had met the challenge and with that came a sense of power—a man couldn't master the bleak, torturous depths without feeling uplifted. Raglan experienced a buoyancy of spirit that he couldn't have explained. But it was there within him as he mounted and rode through a range of rock hills toward the Hatchets.

It was four o'clock when he saw the Mallory buildings from a ridge at the north end of the little valley. Ten minutes later he rode into the ranchyard. Christine sat on the porch; she had been rocking and knitting, but now her chair was motionless and her needles idle. She was staring at him, her eyes wide with surprise. As he reined in, she said, "Where on earth did you come from?"

"From my place on Squaw Creek."

"No, you couldn't have—not that way. Nobody rides through that gorge, and coming over that north ridge—well, you couldn't have come from anywhere else. Don't you know you can't come through Squaw Gorge?"

He laughed. "I came through it."

"I don't believe it!"

HE SAT DOWN on the top step, sat facing her with his back against a post to the porch roof. He took out makings, started a cigarette. "I owe you an apology, Christine. I promised to come calling a while back. I couldn't make it, but not because I didn't want to."

"I wasn't at home that Sunday, anyway."

"That's the truth?"

"Well—toward late afternoon I did go horseback riding. But I didn't wait around for you. Don't think that I did."

"Whatever you say, Christine," he said, and lighted his cigarette. Then, "I guess you heard that I'm not a big-outfit man nowadays, that I'm back to ranching."

"I hear a lot of things," she said, rocking now and her needles busy. "I don't pay much attention. Most of what I hear doesn't interest me." She paused, let her words hang between them. Then: "Anyway, it's nothing to brag about. Pa says that's a hardscrabble range and you'll break your heart trying to make ends meet. I feel sort of sorry for you."

"I'd hope you'd favor me a bit more, now that I was a little man again."

"I feel sorry—" there was a catch in her voice—"for all little cattlemen. You, my menfolks, our neighbors. It's a hard life. But I feel sorriest for somebody ranching over in the Squaw Creek country. That's how I favor you, Ed Raglan."

"Want me to tell you something, honey?"

"Don't you honey me. Just because you happened to catch me home today doesn't mean that I'm letting you come courting." Curiosity got the better of her. "What do you have to tell me, that I'd care about?"

"I'm not going to stay a two-bit rancher. I'm going to build a big outfit in that badlands. That's a promise. You wait and see."

"Why should I wait?"

He dragged hard on his cigarette, not needing time to think of an answer to that but wondering if it wasn't too soon to tell her how he felt. For he had no doubts now; he'd held onto no other woman because he had been seeking, without knowing it, one like Christine. He'd seen her only three

times, and never on the friendliest terms, and so it might be far too soon to speak. On the other hand, he had a hunch she would like him to be honest.

He said, "Why? Because I'm going to have that big outfit partly for myself—and partly for you. Get used to the idea. I want you for my wife."

Christine stopped rocking. Her ball of yarn fell from her lap, rolled toward Raglan. She stared at him, a sort of stricken look in her eyes. She seemed frightened. It was as though marriage and being a wife had never entered her thoughts; though that, he knew, wasn't likely. More probably, he decided, such a thing had always seemed in the hazy future for her and she'd given it no real thought. Confronted by a man who wanted her, she was upset by the sudden realization that she must one day share his—or some other man's—life.

"This is crazy," she said finally. "I never knew of a man like you."

"I guess not, Christine," he told her. "Because there can't be many men right for you." He threw away his cigarette, picked up the ball of yarn, and rose. He rewound the loosened yarn and lay the ball on her lap. He took her chin in his hand and tilted her head back so that they looked into each other's eyes. "I mean every word of it, Christine."

"Maybe you do. But talking and doing are two different things."

"Not for me. What I promise, I do." He kissed her on the mouth.

She was submissive but not responsive, and he moved away feeling foolish. She gathered her knitting together and got from the rocking chair.

"Pa and the boys will be home soon," she said. "It's time I got supper started." She went to the door, then said, over her shoulder, "You're welcome to stay."

He stood there frowning after she'd gone inside, not knowing what to make of her. Then it occurred to him that her casual invitation to supper meant he was making some headway, and that the evening might be made to count even more. He went down from the porch to put up his horse, a grin replacing his frown.

The Mallory men rode in while he was off-saddling his horse. Each gave a nod, and none seemed surprised to find him there. But the three of them looked glum.

"You heard the news, Raglan?" Sam Mallory asked, dismounting. "About Bart Somers?"

"No. What about him?"

"He's dead. Some Tomahawk hands caught him at Drum Lake and shot him dead."

THE MALLORYS had been visiting a neighbor, and another Hatchet Hills rancher stopped by, on the way from Bennett, with the news that some Tomahawk riders brought the bullet-riddled body to town and turned it over to Deputy Sheriff Hibner with the announcement that "now there's one less thief to worry about."

The Mallorys, including Christine, took it hard. They'd known Somers well, Raglan learned, and liked him. But then, everybody had liked him—everybody but the big-outfit men from whom he stole cattle.

None of them ate much for supper, and Sam and his sons soon left the table and went outside. Raglan lingered in the kitchen, watching Christine clear the table and begin to wash the dishes.

When he saw her wipe away tears with the corner of her apron, he said, "It's a sad thing, Chris, but Bart knew the risk he ran. He wanted to see Laurie, and—well, he thought seeing her was worth gambling with his life."

"I know all that," she said. "But he was so young and so full of life. And he's dead for so small a thing. I can't believe that stealing should be punished by taking the thief's life. Do you wonder why I hate the big outfits?"

"I understand how you feel."

"He wasn't really bad."

"No, he wasn't," Raglan said.

He waited until she was finished in the kitchen, then, sensing that she would like to be alone, said that he would start back to Squaw Creek. She walked into the yard with him. Her father and brothers were talking to a rider over by the barn. Raglan roped and saddled his dun.

"I see you again soon, Chris."

"I'll be looking for you, Ed. Be careful."

He nodded. "I will," he said.

Sam Mallory called to him as he turned away. "Ed, come here."

Raglan rode to him and reined in. "Yeah, Sam?"

Mallory nodded at the stranger. "Will Langley," he said. "He and Bart Somers were good friends. Will just came from town. He's told us something he'd better say to your face."

Raglan looked at Langley, a lean man with a sandy mustache and pale gray eyes. He had a rawhide-tough look, and, at the moment, a wolf-mean look. Raglan said, "All right, friend. Say it to my face."

Langley nodded. "All right, I will. There's talk in Bennett that all that shooting Tomahawk and you pulled there was faked. Folks are saying your feud with that outfit is a cover-up."

"A cover-up for what?"

"For your being a snoop like Lew Harnish for the Tulare Basin Cattlemen's Association," Langley said, his tone growing more and more nasty. "According to the talk, you and Matt Dane worked out the scheme so you could get in with us Hatchet Hills ranchers—to spy on us."

"Spy on you for what?"

"To find out if any of us are rustlers—or friends with rustlers."

"That's mighty queer talk. Who started it?"

"It leaked out from a floss at the Stockmen's Bar, one of the percentage girls who's friendly with Lew Harnish. I reckon she heard it from him."

"I reckon she did," Raglan said. "And it's mighty smart of Harnish. He helped frame me, and now that I'm set on proving I was framed, he's trying to make trouble so that I won't have time to get at him."

He looked at the Mallorys. Christine had come to join her father and brothers, and all four of them were looking at him in a troubled way.

He said, "Sam, Chris—you believe this?"

Mallory shook his head. "I don't know, Ed. I just don't know."

LANGLEY said, "Bart was staying with me while he was hiding out. When he left me, he said he was going to stop at Squaw Creek to see you on his way to visit the Dane girl. It could be that you tipped off Tomahawk that he was at Drum Lake."

"You're loco, Langley. I carried the message to Bart about his being on the Vigilante list. If I'd wanted him killed as a rustler, I wouldn't have seen to it that he was warned."

"You might have, to make it look good for yourself—with Bart's friends."

"You've got it all figured out, have you?"

"Bart was a good friend of mine."

"I'm telling you there's no truth to any of this," Raglan said. "And you'd better take my word for it. I made no deal with Matt Dane, and his riders did their best to gun me down."

Langley sneered. "A dozen or more of them hunting for you, but you got away—on Matt Dane's horse. It's plenty fishy." He stood there with feet wide-spread and his thumbs hooked in his gunbelt. "I figure Bart would be alive if somebody hadn't tipped off Tomahawk. Only you and the Mallorys and myself knew he was going to Drum Lake. I trust the Mallorys, and I know I didn't tip off that crowd. So it was you. You'd better clear out of the Hatchets, Raglan—and stay out."

Raglan looked at the Mallorys, and saw no friendliness now on the faces of Sam or his sons. Christine refused to meet his gaze; she turned away and walked toward the house. They'd listened to the evidence, and found him guilty. The case against him seemed damning, but it could be shot full of holes. Bart Somers had got word to Laurie that he would meet her at Drum Lake; he must have sent a message to her by someone—and that someone might have delivered it not to the girl but to her father. Or the Tomahawk riders may have found Bart by accident. He could have pointed this out, but he sensed that it would do no good. He still bore the stigma of having been a big-outfit man, and so he was suspect.

He said, bitterly, "All right, believe what you want," and turned away.

Langley was a bit too hasty. From the corner of his eye, Raglan saw the man grab for his gun. He reacted with even more haste, reining his horse around and raking it with his spurs. He drove it against Langley just as the man completed his draw. The animal's left shoulder struck Langley at the chest, sent him reeling against the wall of the barn. He swore and swung his gun up to club at the horse. The blow missed as Raglan swung the dun the other way. Missing a blow with so much force behind it, Langley was thrown off balance. Before he recovered, Raglan drew his right foot from its stirrup and kicked out. The toe of his boot caught Langley under the chin, staggering him. Raglan swung from the saddle and dropped onto the man's shoulders, driving him to the ground. He pinned Langley down, wrenched the gun from his hand. Langley lay stunned, gasping.

Raglan threw the captured gun onto the roof of the barn, then went to Langley's horse and took the rifle off its saddle. He threw it too onto the roof. He remounted his dun, and watched Langley slowly pick himself up.

He said, "Next time you try anything like that, I'll use a gun on you. Remember that."

The Mallorys made no hostile move, but there was still that look of suspicion about them. And Christine had disappeared into the house.

He swore under his breath, and rode across the yard and away from the place. And now he knew what it was to be lonely.

IT WAS growing dark as he rode from the Mallory ranch, and, not being so foolhardy that he would venture into Squaw Gorge at night, he took the long way home. He rode through the little valley where Luke Chronister had lived and died, then over a range of low hills to the Red Butte range where old J. C. Pierce had located. It was full dark when he dropped down onto Pierce's range, and he could see the lighted windows of the old man's house in the distance. He lifted the dun to an easy lope, intending to cut directly across the valley, but he was about half a mile from Pierce's buildings when a sudden racket of gunfire shattered the night quiet. Alarmed, he jerked the dun to a halt.

The cabin windows were dark now, but the muzzle flashes of the guns were bright in the darkness. It seemed to Raglan that a dozen guns were blasting away. After a first heavy shooting, the fire diminished to a slow but steady sniping. He had no knowledge that old Pierce was feuding with anyone, and so reached the obvious conclusion. The Vigilantes had selected the old man as their latest victim. But unlike Luke Chronister, J. C. Pierce had not been caught off guard—and he was putting up a desperate fight.

In his present frame of mind, Raglan was tempted to mind his own business—go his way. That was what he should do, since both the big outfits and the raggedy-pants ranchers now had made an outcast of him. But he thought of the old man fighting alone, with no real chance of winning the fight, and he reached for his rifle and turned toward the gunbattle. He gave no thought to whether or not Pierce was a rustler, as the Vigilantes were evidently claiming.

He was unseen in the darkness, and now, at long rifle range, he dropped from the saddle and left the dun ground-hitched. He went on afoot until he reached a brush-grown gully. He could see the dark shapes of the buildings now, but the gunmen were behind cover and he marked their positions only by the flashes of their guns.

As he levered a cartridge into his Winchester's firing chamber, there was a sudden lull in the shooting, and a voice shouted, "Call it quits, old man. Come out or we'll burn your damn shack!"

The voice was familiar to Raglan. It was one he'd never forget, since more than once it had baited him into a fight. Jake Leach's voice.

He heard Pierce's croaking voice reply in contemptuous defiance. "Burn me out!" the man shouted. "You'll never hang me!"

Raglan called out, "Leach! You there, Jake Leach!"

His voice echoed and re-echoed in an abrupt silence, then guarded words were bandied back and forth among the men besieging the place.

After a long moment, Leach shouted, "Name yourself!"

"Ed Raglan, Jake."

There was a curse from Leach, and again some discussion. Raglan glimpsed shadowy figures as the Vigilantes gathered behind the barn. Old Pierce saw them too, and cut loose with a flurry of shots. Raglan joined in, blasting away with his rifle. There was some return fire, half a dozen wild shots. The next moment there was a scramble of men and horses, and the Vigilantes rode out in hasty flight. They headed toward the mile-long rock formation called Red Butte, which separated Pierce's valley range from the rest of Tulare Basin. When the drumming of hoofs faded in the distance, Raglan heard Pierce call to him.

He replied, "It's Ed Raglan, J. C."

"Come on in, man."

"Be right with you."

RAGLAN went back for his horse. It had been easier than he'd expected. The Vigilantes had showed a surprising lack of guts. Or maybe it wasn't surprising that they had failed to put up more of a fight, he reflected. They knew, in the backs of their minds, that they were in the wrong, and guilt had sapped their courage. He mounted and rode to the buildings, and saw Pierce in his cabin doorway.

"Raglan, I've never been so glad to see anybody," he said, his voice thick with his feelings. "If you hadn't happened along, I couldn't have held out much longer."

"Glad I happened along. I was on my way to Squaw Creek from the Mallory ranch."

"Well, it sure took the fight out of those hombres. Think they'll come back?"

"I'd say yes, sooner or later. You'd better move out."

"Danged if I will!"

"Your life is worth more than anything you've got here."

"Where would I go?"

"You've got friends farther back in the Hatchets. Go stay with them for awhile."

"That's just what those no-goods want me to do," Pierce said. "Get off my range and let them take over. They aimed to string me up for rustling. I'm swearing to you, Raglan, that I've never rustled in my life."

"What makes you think they want your range?"

"Matt Dane was over here a couple months ago. He wanted to buy me out. Tried to tell me I was too old to go it alone. He's aiming to build up a Hereford herd, but not on the open range. He wants a graze like this one, so he can fence it in without much trouble or cost. I turned him down—and now he's sent those Vigilantes after me."

Raglan said nothing to that, but he worked it around in his mind. If Pierce was telling the truth, and he seemed sincere enough, this might be the explanation for Luke Chronister's death as well as for the attempt on Pierce's life. Matt Dane might be planning to kill off or scare out the two-bit ranchers and then take over their range. Dane was probably beginning to feel crowded; he could be making plans against the day when the main part of the Basin would be overcrowded, assuring Tomahawk's future. Raglan's hatred of the man was growing by leaps and bounds.

Pierce said, "Wait until I get a light. I downed one of them, and he's lying over by the barn. I want a look at him."

He got a lantern, lighted it, and they walked across the yard. A man lay sprawled there, on his back. There was a neckerchief masking his face. Pierce pulled it away, and they saw that the dead man was Hank Mockridge of the Double M.

"Too bad it's not Matt Dane," he said sourly. "If it was, maybe we'd have an end to this rotten business."

"They'll be after you again, for sure," Raglan said. "They'll come for Hank's body, and you won't have the same sort of

luck a second time. You go over to Sam Mallory's place."

"I reckon I'd better. I'll move out in the morning."

"Good. I'll stay with you for the night."

"Glad to have you," Pierce said. "Let's carry Hank into the barn and cover him over. We might as well do right by the dead, no matter what he was alive."

Raglan remained there until morning, standing guard, and the night had passed without the Vigilantes returning. After breakfast, they saddled up, shook hands, and Pierce rode west into the hills while Raglan headed north.

It was late morning when he reached his place at Squaw Creek. He rode in warily, but no Tomahawk hands waited in ambush. He'd had visitors, however, and they'd left their calling card. It was fastened to the cabin door by a horseshoe nail, a piece of brown wrapping paper with the legend painted in red. The legend was the skull-and-crossbones, the numerals 3-7-77.

He stared at the warning with surprise. He was already a marked man, so this could not frighten him. He was too full of anger and hatred to lose his temper now. But he was surprised and puzzled. The Vigilantes had not warned Pierce beforehand. He doubted that they had warned Luke Chronister. He could see no reason why they should give him special treatment.

He compared the warning with the paper he'd taken off Chronister's body, and the same hand had prepared both.

Still, it hardly mattered. He was warned, and he would be a fool not to heed the warning. He would have to follow the advice he'd given old Pierce, go into hiding. But differently. Old J. C. had friends and could go to them. He was alone, an outcast. There was no one to aid and abet him. For a long moment, he considered chucking it all and quitting this range. But his resolved hardened again. He would let them drive him away from his headquarters, but not out of the country. He wouldn't go far—no farther than Squaw Gorge.

[*Turn page*]

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HE SET OUT at noon, leading his horse. He'd made up a pack and tied it across the dun's saddle. The pack contained half his stock of provisions, a coffee pot and a skillet, an axe, his bedroll. He intended to establish a hide-out camp on the bench midway through the gorge. And by leaving some of his provisions and gear at headquarters, he could also move about outside the gorge if he wanted to risk that.

It took him most of the afternoon to make his way down into the gorge and through to the acre-sized bench. There he made his camp at the base of the overhanging canyon wall, convinced that it was as secure a hide-out as any spot within all Tulare Basin.

He off-saddled the dun, then took ax and cut some dead brush and scrub trees into kindling, not quitting until he had a supply sufficient for half a dozen cookfires. He prepared and ate his supper early, and afterward sat smoking by the fire thinking. He turned in early. . . .

He woke and faced the new day with a sense of calm that surprised him. And with a feeling that he had made the right decision. He was convinced that he was in the right, and that the only wrong he could do would be to let his enemies drive him from his range. He would go no farther than this. He would keep his hide-out camp, and use it only when absolutely necessary. Meanwhile, he would return to his range and continue his mavericking—and wait his chance to strike at Matthew Dane. There was still one hope, one he'd forgotten. Frank Amberton had promised to help him prove that he'd been the victim of a frame-up, and sooner or later something might come of that.

He built a fire, brewed coffee, ate some biscuits left over from last night's supper. He drank three cups of coffee, had a leisurely smoke, then saddled the dun and rode from the bench. When the going became difficult, he dismounted and led the horses. He made it to the high rim of the gorge without trouble, then rested his horse for half an hour. He spotted his spare horse half a mile to the north, when in the saddle again, and set out after it.

He shifted his saddle to the roan, then rode to his buildings and got an ax and his branding-iron. He headed north across the range, and five miles across the badlands set about his mavericking.

He had a good day, having burned his RAG on eighteen mavericks by the time the lowering sun touched the crests of the Hatchet Hills. He went to a nearby waterhole and let the roan drink, and stood by smoking a cigarette. He was facing south, and now lifted his gaze to the far reaches of the range. He would return to headquarters and eat, then bed down on the timbered slope behind the buildings. When the Vigilantes came, it would be at night—and he would not let them catch him in his cabin. As he looked in the direction of his headquarters, he saw the first smudge of smoke rise against the pale sky.

At first he felt no alarm, only a sense of puzzlement. Then the smudge grew and blackened, and alarm came. He reached the roan's reins, pulled it away from the water, swung to the saddle. The horse had been worked hard all day, but he gave that no thought now. He raked it with his spurs.

"Come on, boy—come on!"

When finally he reined in the now blowing and lathered roan atop a rocky rise, he saw that it was as he expected—as it could only be. So much smoke could come only from a huge fire, and here in the barren Squaw Creek country there was nothing but his buildings to fuel such a blaze. Both barn and cabin were afire, a mass of high-leaping flames. He did not look long at the burning buildings but searched beyond them with his angry gaze and saw what he'd expected. The men who'd set the fire. There were a half dozen of them, riding toward the gap in the rock hills. They were too far off for him to identify them, but he thought: Tomahawk!

Vigilantes rode by night, with darkness and masks to keep them from being recognized. But Matthew Dane's riders had already let the world know that they were gunning for him, and they need make no

secret of their visit here. They'd hoped to trap him at his buildings, of course. Failing in that, they had burned him out. That was one way to break a man's spirit. Burn his home. Rob him of what bound him to the land.

But it was a game two could play, Ed Raglan told himself.

The calm with which he'd faced the day swept away by surging rage, he started looking for his dun horse. He would need a fresh mount for the trip to Tomahawk headquarters.

AT NINE o'clock that night Raglan reached the cluster of low wooded hills in which Drum Lake nestled. He reined in atop the crest of one of the higher ridges and saw from there the lights of Tomahawk headquarters about three miles to the south. He dismounted to rest his horse, and smoked a cigarette while he waited. His rage was still with him, but he was master of it. It merely backed up his resolve. It would not drive him into taking unnecessary risks. He knew his danger. One misstep would be fatal.

When his cigarette was smoked short, he dropped the butt and deadened it beneath his boot heel. He mounted and rode slowly down from the hills. As he crossed the grass flats, he watched the lights grow brighter and finally take the shape of windows. He came to a small creek and forded it, and in the trees at its bank dismounted and tethered his horse. He went on afoot, aiming toward the ranch house.

He reached the side of the house, went along it to the front corner and halted there to make sure the wide yard was empty. He saw no one. The crew's bunkhouse stood a hundred yards away, remote enough; but its door stood open and a lamp burned inside, showing that not all the hands had turned in for the night. He went up the stone steps, and entered without knocking. He stepped into the unlighted hallway.

He heard Laurie's voice, and then there was music from the piano from the parlor.

[*Turn page*]

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With the girl's playing deadening the thud of his boot heels against plank flooring, he crossed the hall and stepped into the comfortable almost luxurious parlor. The girl saw him at once, and with a discordant crash the music stopped.

She uttered a startled, "Why, Ed Raglan!"

Dane lounged in an armchair at the far end of the room, before the fireplace, with a drink and a cigar. He glanced over his shoulder, said, "What's that?" Then, seeing Raglan, a look of shock touched his ruddy face but was quickly gone. He was poker-faced once more.

He said, "You make a habit of walking into a man's home without being asked, Raglan?"

"I do. When the man has my home burned."

"What's that? What's that you say, man?"

Raglan's angry gaze traversed the room, taking in the red Brussels carpet, the draperies, the fine furniture. There were three lamps burning. One stood on the center table. He moved to the table.

Laurie turned on the piano stool, worry in her eyes. "What's wrong, Ed?"

"Just what I said. Tomahawk burned me out today."

"Dad, you didn't—"

Dane ignored her. He said, "Raglan, you're mistaken."

Raglan swore. "I saw it with my own eyes. I've suffered enough at your hands, Matt. You framed me, branded me a rustler. You cost me my job. Your men beat me up, they went gunning for me. You put my name on the Vigilante list. You sent some of your crew to kill me, and when they didn't find me, they burned my house and barn—on your orders. I'm not mistaken. I could go on from there, and throw into your face what you've done to other men—Luke Chronister, Bart Somers, J. C. Pierce. But why should I? You know how guilty you are. You got a gun handy?"

"Raglan, listen—"

"Talk up. You got a gun handy?"

"No. You want a gunfight with me?"

"Either that, or I even the score with you in another way."

"What do you mean?"

"Matt, I'm burning you out—unless you're man enough to settle this with a gun. How is it to be?"

"You talk like you're out of your mind—I'll give you five minutes to get out of here," Dane said. "Then I'm calling my crew and—"

"You're not calling anybody."

Dane thrust out his chin, hunched his thick shoulders, and heeled for the doorway to the hall. Raglan intercepted him. He caught him by the lapels of his coat and threw him onto a sofa. Dane looked ready to explode with rage, but he saw something in Raglan's manner that kept him slumped there.

Raglan picked up the lamp. It was a huge one, with a glass shade. Its wick was turned high, but Raglan turned it higher.

He said, "Remember this, Matt. My shack meant as much to me as this fine house means to you. I'm only evening the score with you." He flung the lamp against the wall with all his might, and there was an explosive shattering of glass and metal.

Oil spattered the wall and formed a spreading pool on the floor. The wick still burned in the lamp's wreckage, and suddenly it ignited the oil with a blossoming of flame. Laurie was off the piano stool now, screaming. Her father lunged off the sofa, rushed past Raglan, gained the doorway to the hall. A moment later he had the outer door open and was bellowing at the top of his lungs for his crew.

Raglan watched the swift spread of flames for a moment, then turned away. Coming from the house, he saw Dane midway across the yard on his way to the bunkhouse. Dane was still shouting, and now several men came from the bunkhouse as Raglan descended the stone steps. Two of the Tomahawk men started toward him at a run, and one opened fire with his revolver. The shots were great blasts of sound in the night, and Raglan, turning away in abrupt flight, heard the shriek of the slugs.

BRAND OF FURY

They came after him, not shooting now but trying to run him down. He put the house between himself and them, and sprinted for the trees by the creek. He reached the thicket, jerked the dun's reins loose, and swung to the saddle.

Two men, then three more ran toward him. He drove the dun from the trees and across the creek, and gained the opposite bank as a gun blasted once, twice and a third time. With the third shot he reeled in the saddle. He grabbed the pommel to keep from falling. The dun kept on running, and when the next shots came Raglan was out of bulet range—safe except for the wound in his left side.

(To be continued in the next issue)

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 44)

1. The Colorado deer would be a mule deer, which species is normally larger than the white tail deer, and Texas hill country deer are white tails.
2. False. Oats is generally considered better horsefeed because less fattening.
3. Front quarter.
4. Boulder, Colo.
5. Originally "wagon boss" was the title given to the man in charge of a roundup. It still is, but is also sometimes applied to the range boss, range foreman, foreman, or assistant ranch manager.
6. Where else but Texas!
7. False. The Warm Springs, Klamath and Umatilla Indian Reservations are in Oregon.
8. The barrel race is usually run by cowgals, not cowboys.
9. *Bueno, está bueno,* skookum, wayno-hay, slick, big casino, he'll do, all coffee and no cream, top-cut, top-hand, sure 'nough, leather lined, level, all git and no grumble, keno, bang-up, good medicine, pure, center-fire, etc.
10. All are names of beef cattle breeds developed in the U.S. and all have some Brahman blood in them.

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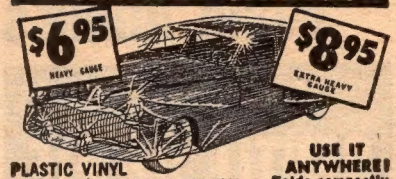

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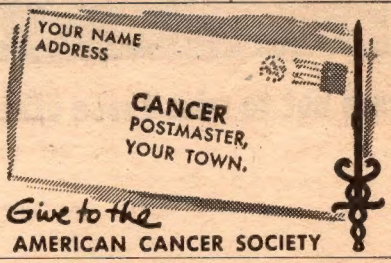

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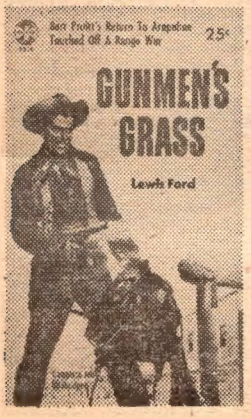

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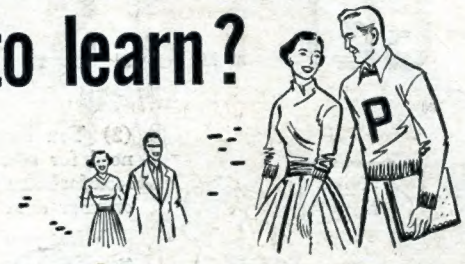

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Why? Your I.C.S. diploma tells your present employer three important things: (1) You want to make the most of your present job. (2) You have the training you need for advancement. (3) You look for better ways of doing things *on your own.*

What you do about your future is up to *you.* Do nothing and stay at your present job at the same old pay. Or earn an I.C.S. diploma in your spare time for *security, promotions, more pay!* Your first step is to mark the course that interests you in the coupon below, and mail it to us.

Free books

We'll send you two interesting books. The first, "How to Succeed," is a gold mine of helpful tips. Points out many small things in your personality and behavior that can make the difference between success and failure. The second book tells you about the opportunities in the field of your choice.

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Many an I.C.S. student has made up the cost of his course in one month with the salary increase his I.C.S. training earned for him. By studying at home in your spare time, you pay yourself many times an hour more than you're now making. (One student reports—"My I.C.S. course was worth $95 an hour to me.")

The security of your present job—or the success in finding the new job you've always wanted—is in *your* hands. Move ahead with I. C. S. training while others stay behind on the routine, small-pay jobs. Remember, your first step to security and success is to mail this coupon. Take a few minutes and do it *now.* If you put it off, it can cost you your future.

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- ☐ Fashion Illustrating
- ☐ Cartooning
- ☐ Sketching and Painting
- ☐ Show Card and Sign Lettering

AUTOMOTIVE
- ☐ Automobile, Mechanic
- ☐ Auto Elec. Technician
- ☐ Auto Body Rebuilding and Refinishing
- ☐ Diesel—Gas Engines

AVIATION
- ☐ Aeronautical Engineering Jr.
- ☐ Aircraft Engine Mechanic
- ☐ Airplane Drafting

BUILDING
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- ☐ Arch. Drafting
- ☐ Building Contractor
- ☐ Estimating
- ☐ Carpenter and Mill Work
- ☐ Carpenter Foreman
- ☐ Reading Blueprints
- ☐ House Planning
- ☐ Plumbing
- ☐ Heating
- ☐ Painting Contractor
- ☐ Air Conditioning
- ☐ Electrician

BUSINESS
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- ☐ Bookkeeping and Accounting
- ☐ Office Management
- ☐ Stenography and Typing
- ☐ Secretarial
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- ☐ Structural Engineering
- ☐ Surveying and Mapping
- ☐ Structural Drafting
- ☐ Highway Engineering
- ☐ Reading Blueprints
- ☐ Construction Engineering
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DRAFTING
- ☐ Aircraft Drafting
- ☐ Architectural Drafting
- ☐ Electrical Drafting
- ☐ Mechanical Drafting
- ☐ Structural Drafting
- ☐ Sheet Metal Drafting
- ☐ Ship Drafting
- ☐ Mine Surveying and Drafting

ELECTRICAL
- ☐ Electrical Engineering
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- ☐ Industrial Instrumentation
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- ☐ Reading Blueprints
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